



EXCITE

WORLDS OF
FANTASY



VOL. I NO. I 60c

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ROBERT E. HOWARD

Also A Report On
J. R. R. TOLKIEN



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WORLDS OF FANTASY

VOL. 1, No. 1

ALL STORIES
NEW

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FADS AND FANTASIES

Fantasy is probably the oldest branch of human literature. Back in the days when the lonely hunters huddled around their small fires and watched the demon eyes of the night searching for their souls, myths were created and tales were told, some of which still echo in the fairy stories we give our children.

Most of such tales were ugly and dark, probably. The nature of the beliefs that man chooses for himself as a communal animal seems to dictate that. The eyes of the night were those of were beasts and vampires, of trolls and boogey men — and of grim demons and gods.

But here and there, some of the tales must have been told for the sheer delight and joy of a good story of wonders. While Odin sat brooding over the fate of Asgard, Thor and Loki were transformed into adventurers who sought wonders — and sometimes even found grim bits of humor stirred into their lives.

If there had been no joy in the tales, the stories would have vanished when the belief in the creatures faded away. Yet almost all of those ancient stories are preserved in folk tales. We still have our witches one day a year, and good fairies come to bless the child old enough to start shedding his teeth. The ugliness has largely gone, leaving the delight behind.

Today, of course, we know too

much to believe in supernatural things or to create demons to control our lives. Or do we? When I pass the newstands, I find the racks well stocked with magazines that deal in astrology and the more blatant periodicals tell of hordes of flying saucers that haunt the skies of night. The belief in spells and oracles and the fear and urge toward beings of inhuman power have not diminished during my lifetime. They were increased remarkably — far faster than the increase in understanding of our basic sciences.

Like most primitive fantasy, our current brand has little that is either imaginative or appealing. The stars offer us no humor as they wheel around the unchanging Zodiac, and the best we can do is to outguess the scheme they have for us. The super-beings from space are full of vain-glory and preaching, but the wonders they reveal are banalities.

Probably such fantasy is the only kind most people can accept. When the routine of daily life demands full attention within the narrow horizon of right-here and right-now, it is useless to expect deliberate displacement from that reality.

And, of course, such a displacement is the very basis of the fantasy of pure enjoyment. A vampire isn't at all funny or entertaining — until

(Cont'd on page 130.)



Ballantine Books

RECENTLY we had occasion to read a manuscript which attempted to present a critique of science fiction designed to draw non s.f. readers into the fold. The general theme was that s.f. could now afford to stand up on its own indeterminate number of literary feet and need no longer be regarded as a pulp relative of "straight" writing.

QUITE aside from the marvellous pomposity of this approach (neatly calculated to keep people away from s.f. in droves) the fact is that if any normal reader were to go through all the straight fiction published in any given month, he'd find 70% of it appalling — not even skillful pulp like Harold Robbins, for instance, or true confessions — à la John Updike. There is an awful lot of rubbish published. But the s.f. field excludes rubbish and keeps the bad stuff down to a minimum. Because only s.f. readers are fanatical enough to want to read *all* the s.f. published. Only s.f. readers are discerning enough not only to read everything, but to come back at authors with criticism, praise, brickbats, encouragement — in short, participation. Only s.f. readers have conventions every year, write each other thousands of opinionated words via hundreds of fanzines, give awards, exchange scandal, get drunk with their favorite authors and, as a group, bring real meaning to the role of readership.

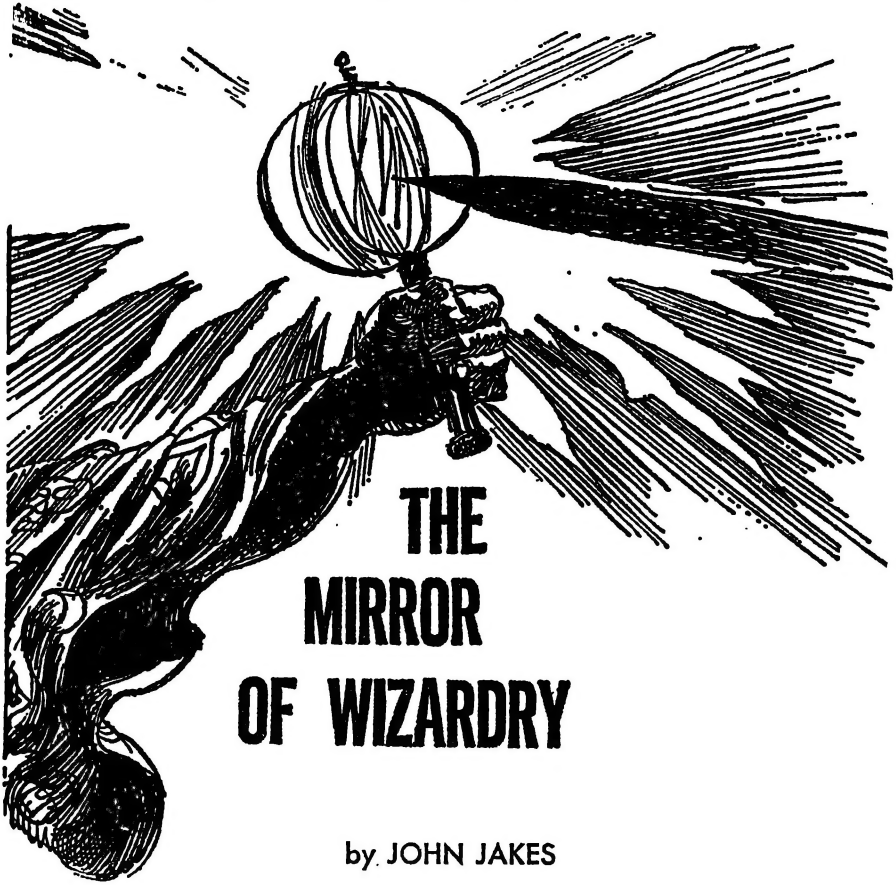
SO there's the way to do it. Challenge the new recruit. Enquire if they have read Tolkien (never mind that he's not s.f.: Tolkien is a magic word, a touchstone; just about anybody knows he wrote a book. And first we have to establish that the prospect is literate). If they have not read Tolkien, suggest they try. If they have read Tolkien, chances are they're wondering. But take the steps from fantasy to s.f. by easy stages, like from Tolkien to McCaffrey to a couple of classics (CHILDHOOD'S END and SPACE MERCHANTS), then one or two pungent Tenn collections perhaps, and on to Leiber and Larry Niven. You're into the hardcore stuff now, and they should be hooked. Turn them loose on A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS and see what happens. Or Asimov, Heinlein, Vance, del Rey, Spinrad, a whole bouncing world of riches.

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THE MIRROR OF WIZARDRY

by JOHN JAKES

The barbarian had faced danger and magic before, but none like that of the mirror of Valonicus. Against dark sorcery, he had only a useless sword — and his rage!

I

All through a cold and forlorn afternoon while the sleet slashed against his face, the big barbarian pushed his stolen pony higher toward the distant pass. He could no longer see the pass itself. Snowstorms ahead had obscured the craggy mountains through which it cut like a wound left in raw flesh by a dagger. But he kept moving, even though his teeth chattered from the cold and the exhaustion of six days on pony back with precious little rest and even less food. Every league he traveled put him that much further away from the outriders of Lord Magnus.

"Keep going, lad," he told the tired pony. "This is no land to rest in. With luck, there'll be time and forage beyond the pass."

The pass represented his main chance. Once through it, he would cross a border and be outside the jurisdiction of the Lord in whose army he had served, against his will, for nearly a year. Or so the old man whom he'd bribed three days ago had told him at a seedy caravanserai at which he'd stopped.

He had emptied his waist-pouch of the last of his few dinshas to obtain that information. Like most of those under the heavy hand of Lord Magnus, the old man had been reluctant to speak of any-

thing beyond the weather to a stranger. But having broken his silence for a price, he had babbled freely and had even drawn a rough map of the fastest route to the pass.

The map had served well enough at first. Now, as he dug his knees into his weary pony and inclined his head to keep the sleet from his eyes, he wasn't sure that he hadn't been gulled by the toothless haggler. The land here didn't fit the map, and he had the nagging worry that he had become lost.

It was a lonely land.

Formidable and ugly, the mountains ringed him. Even when the sleet finally let up, sailing snow-clouds hid the summit. Up there, the old man had told him, vicious storms made travel next to impossible at certain seasons. And this was supposed to be near the beginning of such a time.

In the east, as Brak had noted the day before, the peaks formed an almost uninterrupted rampart. According to tales told by soldiers in the army of Lord Magnus, the Mountains of Smoke hid the birthplace of the elder gods. What lay east of the mighty barrier few could say. None cared to speculate about it except with broadswords handy. The tales hinted at wizards and adepts at the forbidden arts of magic, and only a fool mentioned a wizard, lest his attention be called to the speaker.

Brak had crossed the treeline near noonday. Now he was climbing a twisting trail strewn with huge boulders. Before he reached the pass hidden by the brawling snowstorm ahead, he would be within the heart of the Mountains of Smoke. The prospect was forbidding, but the restless urge to freedom drove him on, coupled with his knowledge of what Lord Magnus' men would do if they caught up with him. He'd seen other deserters from the impressed army last for as long as a week before death finally relieved them of their agony.

Suddenly he heard a thin, keening sound over the noise of the storm. It lasted a moment, died away, and then came again.

"Fever noise," the barbarian grunted. He knew he was ripe for disease from exposure or the bad water he'd been forced to drink. He pounded his palm against one near-frozen ear.

But the keening kept on, modulated by the wind. Again he slammed his hand against his head, hitting the other ear. Little ice crystals that had formed on the long yellow braid hanging down his back tinkled and fell off. The noise rose to a sudden shriek, and Brak realized that it was not a product of his own mind, but the very real wail of another human being.

This was the last place he should

expect to find a traveler, but the cry was now unmistakable. It could be no scout of Lord Magnus, however; the cry came from ahead of him.

He muttered to himself, knowing his own business was more urgent than his interest in another could be. Then he shrugged. "A little faster, lad," he growled to the laboring pony, and dug his knees in harder.

The storm had been abating somewhat, but now a sudden flurry made vision difficult. He rounded another huge boulder, followed a tricky curve in the trail, guided his mount across a slippery crust of ice and approached a dimly seen opening ahead at fair speed.

The thin, poorly-loomed cloak of gray belled from his shoulders, and his cheap tunic flapped around his waist, having worked loose from the garment of lion's hide at his hips. The braid of hair and the tail of the lionskin stood out behind him as he fought the pony up a rise and went into a skidding descent on an icy slope beyond.

The wind quieted suddenly, cut off by the rocks around, and his vision suddenly improved. He saw a fairly spacious cup-like depression completely surrounded by rocky walls. At the far side of the hollow he made out a strange shape, leaping and seeming to flap wildly. His ears filled with the frightened cries of a human voice.

Now he could also hear a weird, oddly terrifying snapping and clicking from nearby. There was nothing human about those sounds.

He clutched at the hilt of his huge broadsword with one hand while the other dragged back on the reins of the frightened pony. As the pony came to a skidding stop, he could see the flapping apparition was a woman.

She was running in frantic zig-zag course between peculiar round boulders that seemed to be strewn across the floor of the depression. Her arms were waving frantically to balance her twisting body, and her hair trailed out behind her. As she ran, she screamed.

As Brak sent the pony charging toward her, the clicking sounds seemed to multiply suddenly. *Clicka-clack, clicka-clack!* Abruptly the pony whinnied in fear and shied.

Brak looked down and shock jolted through him.

One of the small brown stones suddenly split horizontally across its blank face. The edges of the crack widened and a rocky maw gaped, widely, edged with sharp rock crystals like teeth.

Brak had seen enough things in his travels to make him reasonably immune to the usual frights and wonders. But he had never seen a living stone opening to bite with savage crystal fangs!

The pony stumbled on a patch of ice. Too late, Brak shifted his weight to avert the disaster. The pony's forefoot slid close to the widening maw of living rock. There was a ghastly snapping of crystal teeth as the rock bit together, and the pony's hoof sheared off, spouting blood. The animal screamed and reared.

Brak tumbled frantically to the left, barely pulling himself free. He fell with jarring force, still gripping the broadsword in his hand. When he could look again, he saw the pony floundering on its side. And from all directions, the strange rocks were converging. They rolled toward the struggling animal with little side-to-side motions. Jaws were opening and clicking shut in each rock.

As Brak started for the pony, he heard the woman scream again. He turned his head, and it nearly proved his undoing. He felt something move against his foot; he leaped back, just before one of the rocks snapped its hideous jaws together where his ankle had been.

He jerked backwards several quick steps. The rolling rocks were gathered around the fallen pony and the jaws were articulating wildly, clashing and biting. The pony squealed, and blood was flowing from a dozen wounds.

Howling with rage, Brak plunged forward. He jumped over three of the stones that gnashed at him.

He drove his broadsword through the neck of the pony and deeper toward its brain. The animal gave a shudder and mercifully went limp.

Small savage teeth raked against the hard leather that encased Brak's heel. He whirled as the jaws of stone started to shut on his boot. He thrust downward with his sword, ramming the iron savagely into the rock jaws. The rock was porous and soft, like pumice, and the broadsword sheared through it. The rock rolled backward as it split, the jaws clashing harshly.

As the sword came free, a vile smelling jet of yellow gas poured from between the stone teeth. That rock lay quiet, but all around the other rocks rolled and crunched toward him, bumping against and over the dead pony, and closing in.

II

His face contorted with anger, Brak jumped as high and far as he could, to land on bent knees a short distance beyond the clacking stones. He dodged the nearest one and turned toward the place where he had last seen the woman.

She had fallen chest down into a channel of trickling water that ran through the depression. Her fall had broken a thin crust of ice and she lay with one leg twisted beneath her, her peasant robe

soaking up water. She seemed to be breathing but was unconscious. A dozen rocks were rolling toward her from all directions. As he ran, Brak glimpsed another fallen horse. It was little more than bones and blood. More of the stones were clustered around and on top of it, and the sounds of the rock jaws crunching was a loud cacophony. Brak ran faster.

A rock rolled down to the water's edge, near the woman's outstretched foot. Brak brought his broadsword down. The stone seemed to sense the attack and hitched itself sideways. His blade glanced off it with a ringing clang.

The force of his charge and the icy ground sent one foot out from under him and he fell to one knee. Instantly, more of the stones at the water's edge converged on him.

As he forced himself up from the icy water, he switched his grip so that both hands were around the hilt of the broadsword. Then, yelling the guttural oaths of the high steppes, the wild lands of the north where he'd been born, he hacked and chopped and bludgeoned until the depression rang with the clamor of iron and the harsher sound of breaking rocks.

Darkness was beginning to fall, cutting down his range of vision. Still the rocks rolled forward, and Brak still hacked, gouged and slashed. Rage was like a cloud of red mist across his eyes.

He had come to see that the rocks could not enter the moving water, but he did not retreat the foot or so that would carry him beyond their reach. Instead, he moved out of the stream, carrying the fight to them.

Finally, thews aching and belly heaving, he let the broadsword drop. He scraped both sides on the bank of the little stream, looking for damage to the blade. There were scratches, but it was still a usable weapon. Then he wiped the ice-crystals from his eyes and stared through the gloom.

The horse and his pony were piles of white bones. The rocks, sated or driven off by his furious attack, were in full retreat. Their stone jaws were almost silent now. He watched the last rock bump out of sight toward the depression walls, now almost hidden in darkness and the snow that was beginning to fall.

He stared down at the immobile rocks that surrounded him. They were no longer moving, their split roundness showing no sign of gaping maws. It was impossible to tell that they had ever been anything but what they now seemed. He shuddered and drew breath deeply into his lungs. Then he heard a faint sound.

The woman was conscious again. She lay on her side in the trickling water, watching him. An

arm that had been moving when he first saw her stilled quickly as she saw his gaze. He tried to smile at her, though his face felt frozen. But she didn't respond. She was obviously terrified at the sight of him.

There was still enough light for him to see that she had fair hair and a pleasing form that even her soaked and bedraggled cloak could not hide. She had an olive face with the hint of southern climes in the dark eyes; it should have been pretty, but now it was haggard and fear-stricken.

Brak lumbered toward her, holding out his hand. She stared wide-eyed at his big fingers.

"My pony is dead and so is your horse," he said. "We need to find a shelter."

Automatically, he glanced toward the pile of bones that had been his pony, heartsick at the loss. It had been his only friend for days, as well as his only means of swift passage through the Mountains of Smoke.

But now the girl claimed his attention. She was obviously on the edge of screaming terror. He tried to soften his voice as he extended his hand clumsily again. "Come, girl, I won't harm you."

"Garr sent you!" Her teeth rattled with more than cold as she drew back from him. "You're with Lord Garr — or the wizard, Valonicus! I know you are!"

"I'm with none but you," he said, annoyed. "Will you get up before we both freeze?"

When she wouldn't, he slammed his broadsword back in place and stooped to pick her up. At first, she protested. But when he flung her unceremoniously over his shoulder, she gave up the struggle.

Double-damned and triple-damned luck, he thought as he plodded up the trail in the darkening now. Pony gone and burdened with a woman half out of her mind and ranting of wizards. It seemed that the elder gods who reputedly inhabited these regions at the eastern limit of the known world mocked him indeed, and bid him fail in his flight toward freedom and the open highroads.

Then he frowned, thinking of her words again. Maybe there was more than mere ranting of a wizard in her accusation — maybe she knew more than he'd first thought. Brak had heard legends of the ancient days when the elementals of earth were overcome by the elder gods and chained in rocks, forbidden to exercise their evil craving for the blood of life. It was said that a wizard could unchain them for a day by powerful spells, though no wizard Brak had seen could do the trick.

But what wizard could unleash their evil from untold distance? And if such a wizard did exist, what had Brak got himself into?

Warily now, he climbed higher through the storm. As night fell fully, he found a cave. It offered shelter to his body, but scant comfort to his mind.

III

Brak still had a few dried lumps of meat in his pouch. These he shared with the girl. She munched in silence, eyeing him with huge opal eyes full of terror.

He'd managed to forage a bundle of small sticks from the stunted shrubs that grew above the tree line, and the back of the little cave had a nest of old rubble from occupancy by some animal. They gave off an unpleasant odor after he pulled them in a corner of the cave and struck them to fire, but they took the chill off the damp place. Now he squatted across from the girl as the flames threw shifting patterns across her wind-chapped skin.

She wasn't more than twenty years old, he judged, though her nerves and a touch of hardness about her made her seem older. She started at every sound from outside, and seemed to be listening when there was no sound.

"Better get out of those wet clothes," he advised.

She finished the last of her meat. "No." Terror darted into her eyes. "No!"

He shrugged. "Be stubborn,

then. But you're a fool. I've no desire to molest you. Not in this cold."

His crude grin meant to reassure her, but it won no warming response. She said, as if it were explanation enough: "You're a barbarian!"

"So they say. My name is Brak, by the way."

Hoping to put her at ease, he began telling her about himself from his birth in the high steppes to his desire to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far to the south. He held out his huge arm to show the scabs at his wrist where the smith had been bribed to hack away the bronze bracelet that all soldiers of Lord Magnus wore.

"So it took a year to get free of his army, but here I am — wherever here is," he finished. He crossed his legs and tried to smile again. "Now, what about you?"

After a brief hesitation, she nodded. "My name is Nari."

"That's a start. Where do you come from?"

Memory cast an ugly veil over her beauty. "From the kingdom of Gilgamarach, many leagues to the west."

"I've heard of Gilgamarach in my travels, though I've never been there."

She clasped her hands around her legs protectively. Another chill

seized her. The small fire had done little to dry her sodden garments. "Better that you haven't. It's a kingdom of filthy men who would — do anything to —"

She stopped, but he urged her on. "What brought you here to those fanged rocks?"

She shuddered, her face paling a trifle. "Gods! My horse fell before I knew — and they were closing around me —" She covered her face with her hands, in a gesture that was somehow contrived and calculated.

Brak waited for the horror of her memories to pass. Then, more firmly than before, he said, "Nari, I'm the owner of a fairly even temper — except when I'm done an injustice. This evading my questions is an injustice. At least you owe me some explanation of what one lone girl is doing in the Mountains of Smoke. You know why I'm here — running toward the pass and a road south." His eyes hardened as he waited. "Tell me, Nari."

"I'm running as well," she whispered.

"From the wizard you mentioned?" Brak asked. "The one who can free the stone demons without even being here?"

"Valonicus," she said. "And he could have been here, since he can travel without his body." She shuddered, then shook her head. "No, I'm fleeing from Garr, who calls

himself Lord of Gilgamarch. He's only the illegitimate half brother of the rightful Lord who sits on the throne, but he's a year older and claims his right of precedence. And Valonicus serves him, for some reason I do not know. I came to the Mountains of Smoke with them because I believed Garr."

Suddenly there was a new, angry note in her voice. She edged forward toward the fire, her face intense.

"I have a secret, barbarian — one that was given me as a child. Through years of poverty — living in hovels, one step ahead of the slavers — I saved that secret. Then Garr appeared, planning to seize the throne. And I offered him that secret in return for his pledge that I should sit on the throne as queen when he won. So I rode here with him and Valonicus, who could bring forth the marks my father — "

She stopped abruptly, then went on too quickly. "Garr's a fool. I had the secret that could win him the army to take the throne. But he lied to me. I sneaked back when he thought me gone ahead and heard him plotting with Valonicus, laughing at the gutter girl who wanted to be queen. So I fled at night before the secret was fully revealed, up the trail ahead of him."

There was a flash of something strange in her eyes.

Brak considered it, his hand unconsciously reaching toward the great broadsword. "Then this Lord Garr and the wizard may be following you now for the secret — and close behind?"

Terror mounted in the dark eyes again. "Yes."

He swore softly to himself for wasting time in idle talk. Then he grimaced. In this storm and without a horse, there was little enough he could have done. "How many fighting men with them?"

"Three. Ruffians and murderers who have fled the army."

Five men — and one of them a wizard — against a single unmounted fighter made the odds too long. Unless the girl was lying. "This secret they're chasing you for — what is it, Nari?"

Suspicion washed over her face. "The price is a throne, barbarian. You don't need it."

Brak cursed again to himself, but gave up. Her answer could be from ambition or the action of a romantic girl lying to make herself more than she was. He fished the last sliver of meat from near the fire and munched it. Then he rose and stretched.

"Very well. You'd better sleep. But first take off those wet robes and dry them. Wear this while you do." He unloosed his gray cloak and flung it to her.

She started to shake her head. A couple of drops of melted ice

fell from her fair hair onto her hand, and she stared at them. At length she gave a meek, tired nod.

"All right. But you must go outside."

"As you wish." The modesty seemed false in her, somehow, but he was in no mood to argue further. "Don't flatter yourself that it's a great sacrifice to me, though."

The lion tail swung behind him as he stalked out into the night. He wandered a short way down the rock slope, sucking in the painfully cold night air. For the moment, at least, the storm had passed and the sky was mostly clear, though cloud masses still threatened near the horizon. The deep dark of winter formed a black bowl up above, relieved only by the thin sliver of the moon and here and there the sharp light of the brighter stars.

She was probably telling the truth as she saw it, he decided. The biting rocks must have been meant as a trap, and hardly for him. So there was a mighty wizard somewhere behind, and a usurping lord. It was a bad combination to cross. The prospects seemed even more gloomy than they had an hour ago.

Brak stared up past the dim cave mouth toward the east. There, summits still hidden by clouds of drifting snow, the Mountains of Smoke reared bleak and forbidding. He thought he could pick out the darker gap of the pass

that was his destination. Apparently, the old man's map had been right, after all.

To the left of it, in an area previously hidden by the storm, he noticed a strange black rock formation. It contrasted sharply with the vast white patches of glacial ice around it. By uncertain moonlight, the black formation seemed to resemble the skull of a man.

Or was it only his imagination brewing phantasms and omens out of shadows? He shivered again. After what he judged was time enough for the girl to change, he turned and climbed back toward the cave entrance.

He must have misjudged the time, or she had dawdled. Nari was still busy spreading her soaked garments out to dry by the fire and her naked back was toward him. It was a shapely back, and Brak's eyes rested on it with normal male approval at first. Then her eyes flared wide as he stood in the shadows and looked at what lay on the olive skin revealed in the firelight. He was still staring when she reached down gracefully and raised his cloak. She swirled it around her shoulders, hiding her flesh.

Quickly Brak retreated a few steps, coughed, and rattled stones with his foot. Then he marched up and into the cave.

Nari huddled against the cave wall, watching him with alert eyes.

"It's bitterly cold out there, but I heard no horsemen," he told her. "Perhaps the lord and wizard have turned back."

"No." She was positive. "They will find me. And hearing no sounds of horses from far off means nothing. Valonicus has other means of traveling, as I told you. His mirror — "

Again she stopped

"Damn, girl, can't you finish anything? Your obscure hints would make any man angry."

For the first time, she seemed genuinely concerned. "I'm sorry, Brak. Garr and many others have used me badly, and it leaves a mark, though I don't mean to sound distrustful. I thank you for what you did in the place of rocks. But I can best thank you for that by not making you share the secret that has put Garr and Valonicus on my trail." She smiled wearily. "May I sleep now?"

"Sleep," he told her. "Good night."

He picked up his sword again and went to stand guard by the cave entrance. His eyes roved from the far stars to what he could see of the trail, and his thoughts narrowed to the mystery of the girl who was already asleep behind him.

From the base of her neck to the midpoint of her spine, her

back had been covered with strange markings and colorations, all arranged in a curiously tantalizing design which was meaningless except for one detail. They had ended in obvious lack of completion, as if half of the drawing was still to be shown.

One thing had been clear enough, however. Between her shoulder blades there was a black configuration that resembled the skull-rock up by the pass. It resembled the thing so closely that even now Brak's palms itched at the felt presence of some dark and unknown menace.

Some of the menace was clear enough, however. If her half-revealed secret lay on her back and that involved the skull-rock formation by the pass, they were in for trouble. Garr and Valonicus would be bound for a destination that matched the route he had to take.

IV

Many hours later, after the moon had set, weariness finally overcame the big barbarian. He abandoned his useless watch and lay down near the mouth of the cave. The fire had burned almost out; little remained but small coals that shone like orange gems. Brak could barely see Nari's huddled form. Her breathing was light and restless, as though nightmares

troubled her. Now and then she moaned. He listened to the night stillness. There was no sound of hooves or the sound of men. The cold iron of his broadsword rested against his bare leg and he curled his fingers around the hilt.

The cheap tunic did little to protect him against the biting cold, but he had grown up with such hardships. In time, he slept in utter exhaustion. He never knew afterward how long he dozed before the gray light wakened him.

It could not have been long. Total darkness still gripped the world outside the cave. Brak swam up from slumber, grunting in annoyance at the pale radiance that flickered against his closed eyelids. Now it waned, then it waxed. He opened his eyes, to choke back a cry of dismay and shock.

A radiant gray cloud whirled in the cave mouth. Through it, Brak could see the far stars, though they were indistinct and discolored. The cloud spun around and around with a deep whistling sound.

Then its grayness brightened to a white and grew in brilliance until it lit all the cave's interior and brought Nari out of her slumber with a thick, low cry.

Brak's hand was suddenly sweat-slimed, and he rubbed it against his tunic before taking a firmer grip on the sword hilt. He bent his right leg beneath him, preparing to rise and confront whatever the

light might be. But before he could come to his feet, he saw that the blazing cloud was rearranging itself into the pattern of a human figure.

The man-shaped cloud hovered just above the ground. Its hands were hidden in the voluminous sleeves of a robe that was marked with cabalistic symbols. The head of the figure was abnormally large and completely hairless, looking like a skull; below the bald pate was a triangular face, and the phantom's pronounced cheekbones and bony brow ridges lent the face a mad, fantastic cast. From above a fierce-chiseled nose, two oval eyes watched and searched. In all the whiteness of the apparition, the only color belonged to the eyes, which were a brilliant yellow.

Behind Brak in the darkness, Nari screamed.

The specter-lips cracked and smiled as Brak stumbled to his feet with sword arm drawn back. He stepped forward cautiously, then advanced another step. The cloud began to disintegrate. The features of the phantom face melted, returning to wisps of smoke.

Nari's shrieking beat against the big barbarian's ears as he forced himself to move. The yellow eyes glared from one of them to the other. Dimly, Brak understood that he and the girl had been seen

and recognized. The eyes of the specter broke apart and drained of color.

Brak howled savagely and ran at the horror with his broadsword.

As he drove the point of his weapon into the cloud, its whirling motion seemed to cease for the length of a heartbeat. Some shocking force jolted back through the blade into Brak's hand and ran up his wrist and arm. He was hurled from his feet and thrown against the wall of the cave, still clutching the sword. The tip of the weapon struck against the rock with a wild clangor.

Immediately, the process of dissolution began again, and the cloud faded. The whistling sound died away, and the thing was gone.

Brak blinked his eyes and shook his head, muttering a curse. His backbone crawled as he came to his feet, and his arm still seemed numb from the jolt he had received.

By some eldritch means, whatever thing had been in the cloud had suspended its disappearance long enough to demonstrate its power with the blast of agony through Brak's sword. The eyes in the thing had looked on his attack as effrontery, and it had shown its contempt and wrath deliberately.

Now even the cloud of fine ash that had been stirred from the fire began to settle. Brak could see

nothing but the bleak vista of the mountains outside the cave, with a hint of false dawn breaking.

He lumbered back to where Nari rocked back and forth on her haunches. She was sobbing uncontrollably, and he struck her face with the flat of his hand. She cried out at the blow, but the punishment had the desired effect. She calmed slowly and began to release herself from the tight ball in which she had been.

Brak gripped her shoulders between his huge hands. "You recognized that hell-thing. Your scream said as much. Well?"

She gulped and tried to speak, but only meaningless noise came from her lips. Then she caught herself and nodded tightly. "It was Valonicus. It was the wizard."

"But not the real wizard. What was it — his ghost sent out to spy on us?"

Nari wiped tears from her cheeks. "No, not **his** ghost. At least he stays aware while he sends it out. He can make a duplicate of himself — create another wizard of smoke." Her shoulders wrenched and she shuddered. "I've seen him perform the trick for Garr when the trail was hard to follow and he wanted to scout our way. He can send the shadow-self traveling at great distances."

Brak grunted. "So I think you hinted before. And I suppose he

used the shadow to free the rock demons, though how a shadow of light can cast a spell . . . What kind of mirror is it?"

"It looks like any mirror, despite the enchantment, though the glass shines on both sides. It's mounted in spindles at the top and bottom so he can twirl it. Valonicus always keeps it on his person and allows no one else to touch it."

"I've heard of seeing through magic mirrors, but not sending out ghosts through them," Brak said. "But the thing was alive and aware. It watched us."

She nodded. "And Valonicus knows what it saw. Valonicus is an evil man, but they say he's the greatest of all sorcerers. Garr does out what little wealth he still has in his coffers to keep the wizard with him. He has promised that Valonicus will be the supreme head of the priestly cult in Gilgamarch after the army he raises can take the throne. From the talk I heard at the campfires, Valonicus had been thrown out of many other countries, and he's willing to do anything for Garr in return for a place of power of his own."

"Still, he's a fool," Brak said, voicing thoughts that had been in the back of his mind. "He wants you alive for your secret, but he sets the rock demons against you. That makes no sense."

She shook her head. "The rocks

attacked the horses and you. But now that I've had time to think, I remember they never actually touched me. They were only partly freed."

Suddenly Nari's control broke, and she thrust herself against Brak's broad chest. Convulsions shook her whole body. He touched her hair gently and tried as best he could to comfort her. The dawn must be breaking, since there was light enough now for Brak to see fear lurking deep in the girl's eyes.

She pushed herself away with a final shiver. "Now that Valonicus has sent his ghostly double to discover us, he and Lord Garr will soon be here. They'll double their speed to catch us."

With a nod of bleak agreement, Brak replied, "Then we must double ours as we flee them."

"Where?"

"To the pass that leads from the Mountains of Smoke," he answered. It went where he had to go, and it was no worse a choice for escape from Garr and Valonicus than any other.

"It's useless, Brak. We can't travel fast enough to outrun them," she protested.

He knew she was probably right, but it was no reason to give up now. He grinned at her without humor. "We can try."

She nodded reluctantly. He left the cave while she put on her own clothing. Then, bundled again in

his cloak, he led the way along the rocky trail that wound upward around the side of the slope. The summits of the peaks hid behind windblown clouds of snow. A storm was again rising, and he grumbled at the weather that seesawed without reason here.

Ahead, through a rent in the clouds, Brak glimpsed the black skull-rock.

V

The wind rose as they went on, and Brak bent into it, already frozen to the center of his bones by its blast. Nari stumbled often, leaning on him for support as they wended their way higher.

Brak moved on steadily, but his mind was only half on their progress. The memory of the black skull-rock and the similar shape on her back bedevilled the curiosity that was always strong in him; and the picture of the yellow eyes out of the cloud stayed in his thoughts making his belly churn with alarm.

Snow began to slant through the air around them. Fat flakes drifted against their cheeks and onto their eyebrows. The wind sang like a lonely ghost and blew the snow in cold veils.

They slipped and stumbled often. Brak's calves ran with blood where he gouged them on rocky outcroppings, and he was for once grateful for the stout leather Lord

Magnus had used for his mounted soldier's boots. The trail became choked with snow, and following it grew harder. The sun dimmed from a disc to a vague opalescent light that shed no warmth.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of tramping and with no certainty that they were any closer to their destination than when they started, Brak called a halt.

They rested in the lee of a boulder, out of the chilling wind. He sat down in the damp snow and wrapped his cloak around them both. Nari's teeth were chattering and she huddled against him.

"We'll never live to reach the pass, barbarian."

"I faced worse blizzards when I was a youngster. It's certain our chances will be even worse if we allow your Lord Garr and his sorcerer to catch us."

"They would kill you," she agreed. Then she added, without relief. "They wouldn't *kill* me."

"Encouraging thought," he mumbled. "How so?"

"Because the treasure map on the skin of my back is only half complete and once I'm dead, Valonicus couldn't —"

Suddenly she closed her mouth as she realized that her fatigue had betrayed her. Snow drifted against her eyelids as she stared up at the barbarian's face. She pulled away, again afraid of him.

"Treasure," he said. It fitted.

A usurper always needed more money than he could get to make his dreams of raising an army come true.

"I didn't mean . . . I don't know what I'm saying, Brak."

Again she stopped as she saw the hardening of his mouth.

But his voice was as patient as he could make it. "Nari, we're both playing poor odds with death. The time for your games is done. I want to know what I'm protecting you from and why. Why are Garr and his wizard after you? You can tell me or not—but if not, I'll head for the pass without you to slow my way."

She huddled back against him, seeming almost relieved as she answered him.

Her father had been a magician of some note himself, and his name — Krim Shan — was respected in the court of the Yellow Emperors of Tobool far to the west. Ten years earlier, he had accompanied the son of the Emperor, Lord Yian, a venturesome young man, on a treasure expedition over the crest of the Mountains of Smoke.

The young prince proved right, and instead of a precipice where the world ended or a belching hell in which the nestling gods were raised, the expedition found a wealthy mountain kingdom ripe for plundering. Lord Yian's soldiers

stripped the kingdom of vast stores of precious metal and bulging chests full of priceless gems.

But a magician of the kingdom had cursed them mightily before he died and the party met with disaster in returning through the Mountains of Smoke. A storm of enormous proportions killed Lord Yian and most of his companions in a series of cataclysmic avalanches. Krim Shan and three others escaped with their lives. The treasure was lost down a crevasse that opened at the height of the avalanche.

They had no means to reclaim the treasure and their lives would be forfeit if they returned to announce that the prince had died. They decided to seek safety in Gilgamarch, stopping so that Krim Shan could send a trusted friend to spirit away his daughter and bring her to him. On the journey south, the three died, and Krim Shan was stricken with a fatal plague. He died the sole man possessing knowledge of the location of the lost treasure of Tobool.

But before he died, he reached Gilgamarch with his only heir, Nari. At that time she was but eight years old. Breathing his last in a filthy hovel in the stews of the capital, he summoned his magical powers and traced in the flesh of the young girl's back with a detailed map to the treasure.

Then, with a special unguent, he made the map vanish until the

time when a proper counter potion could be applied. He called for a scroll and stylus and with these wrote his legacy. He thrust it into the hands of the sobbing child and expired.

Nari grew up to gradual realization of the value of her father's gift. The scroll told her that any qualified sorcerer could bring the map forth on her skin by the use of the proper hot applications of available herbs.

Brak nodded as she stopped her tale. "And you bided your time, waiting for the right person to whom you could barter the secret. Didn't you ever think of trying to reclaim the treasure yourself, instead of offering it to another?"

"At first," she told him. "But I had no money for an expedition, nor could a woman head it. Brak, as a child I ran wild and hungry in the streets, begging for crusts to stay alive. I began dreaming of wealth, but in time I wanted more. I wanted protection and a man who could make me respectable."

Her mouth twisted as she continued. "Finally, I heard of Lord Garr. I went to him, and we struck a bargain — my body with the map in return for a throne." She shook her head. "I was a fool to think a man like that could respect me. But at least I escaped and destroyed the wizard's potion before the

map could be completed. He's not happy now, the proud and unfaithful dog!"

"Then why should he want you, if he can't restore the map?" Brak asked.

She huddled closer, and the temper died out of her. "I was more fool than I said, Brak. The wizard knows another way to bring out the map. And that —"

Brak considered it silently. It accounted for the black skull-rock between her shoulders — a marker that could not be missed. It seemed to fit what he had seen on her back and explain why the markings had been incomplete. Maybe with luck . . .

"Could the two of us take the treasure if we found it?"

"I don't think so. It will still be buried in the crevasse. Garr's men brought pack animals laden with special tools and ropes for getting down and digging through the ice. He expected to send back to Gilgamarch for more help after he dug up enough to pay for supplies and men."

"Then we'd best ignore it," Brak decided. He rose, brushing the snow away from his eyes. "Time to move for the pass. We have rested enough."

With a weary sigh, Nari got to her feet. The snow came up around their ankles, now crusting and numbing. The girl's expression was forlorn as they set out.

"My father meant to leave me a treasure of great price," she remarked bitingly. "Now it has become nothing but a curse. If we escape, barbarian, I'll make my life different. I'll save my secret until I've lived together with a man long enough to know him well. Brak, what's wrong?"

Brak's hand was raised in warning. Out in the snow he heard a clink of pony harness. He guided Nari to the left through the drifts, while his hand dropped to the hilt of his broadsword. Suddenly a horse's head loomed out of the storm, and a cowed face stared at them with eyes of deep yellow.

"Lord Garr!" the horseman cried. "We've run them to earth!"

VI

Hooves spun the snow away in white streamers. Four riders charged out of the murk behind the gray-robed horseman who kneed his stallion to one side to let the others pass. Brak flung Nari behind him and freed his sword, snarling at the foes who faced him.

The four riders wore dark cloaks and heavy leather helms and breastplates. Carved halfmoon blades flashed in their hands. They galloped up around Brak, hemming him in between the heaving flanks of their mounts. He raised his broadsword, but they were no

fools; they kept at a distance just out of his reach, but where one could ride at him instantly. One of the riders, taller and with heavy snow-rimed mustaches, uttered a harsh laugh and flicked the ornamented reins of his bridle. "So this is the outlander you saw, Valonicus?"

"Run, girl!" Brak howled, and leaped to the attack.

His broadsword swung, but the shout had given warning to the rider, and the blade glanced off the breastplate of the moving man. At the same time, the rider hacked down with his scimitar. Brak dodged. The blade whistled past his ear, barely missing him.

The rider hacked again, and this time he nipped a bit of skin from Brak's cheek. Bleeding, the big barbarian leaped high and drove his sword into the man's chest with all the force of both his arms. The rider shrieked and tumbled from the saddle, dragging the broadsword with him.

The tall man with the mustaches was shouting orders, and the two other riders flung themselves out of their wooden saddles to leap on Brak's back. The suddenness of their move caught him off balance and he went down on his hands and knees, while they pounded him with blows from their fists and boots.

He shook his head dizzily and started to struggle to his feet, but

It was too late. A rider stood near him with ready scimitar. The other had found Brak's gory broadsword and now pitched it off into the snow, where it vanished into a drift. Brak heard Nari screaming and searched for her in the blowing white confusion of the storm. He saw her staggering away, but too close for any hope of escape.

The cowed wizard Valonicus rode after her. He caught her, wrapped his long-nailed hand in her hair, and jerked her to a stop. His yellow eyes were dancing with evil humor as he dragged her back to where the two soldiers were guarding Brak.

Garr brushed some flecks of snow from his mustaches and dismounted now, making a show of elegance in his manner. He had a mottled red face and one of his eyes looked milky in the pupil. Yet there was a power about him, a certain air of assurance as he stalked up to Brak and flicked the barbarian across the face with a soft leather glove.

"Has Nari told you her pitiful tale, outlander? Has she gulled you into trying to help her?"

Brak glared back without answering.

Garr's cheeks became more mottled. "Valonicus, this long-haired lout shows a lack of respect to the Lord of Bilgamarch."

Valonicus threw Nari down in

the snow and climbed leisurely down from his horse. His hands were hidden in the voluminous sleeves of his symbol-marked robe, just as they had been when the smoke-double appeared in the cave. Brak recognized the face, and a crawling shudder worked down his back. The gaze of the wizard was cruel and sure, now tinged with some vile mirth.

"Lord Garr!" Brak shouted. "Strumpet's son, you mean!"

One of the soldiers kicked him in the groin, doubling him over in agony. Garr let out a pleased laugh.

"Before we kill him or leave him to die, Valonicus, can't you give him some instructions in the art of being respectful to his betters?"

"A most seemly suggestion," the wizard answered. "It will give us time to get the kinks of too much riding out of our muscles."

Garr turned back to Brak, and he was smiling now. "Crawl for me, barbarian," he suggested softly. "Crawl on your hands and knees and do me homage."

Snarling, Brak lunged for him, to be brought up short by the grip of two soldiers. Valonicus made a swift, supple gesture of tossing something invisible at Brak and muttered a string of singsong words.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, and Brak drew a breath of relief. Then some ghastly force

seemed to reach out an unseen hand and seize all of his limbs at once. Before he could try to resist, he was smashed flat on his chest in the snow.

His vision blurred as he fought the devil's force that seemed to constrict around his body. He found his knees bending and his torso sliding forward. His hands scrabbled in the snow, lifting him so that he found himself before Garr on his hands and knees.

Even his neck bowed against his will into a posture of servility.

He wrenched at the muscles until they threatened to cut off his breath from the pressure, but he could move his head no higher than it was.

Then, while Valonicus chuckled somewhere behind him in the howling snow, Brak's knees jerked him forward. Against his will, he found himself crawling forward until he was staring down at Garr's boots. Slowly, his arms bent and his head came down until his forehead barely touched the toes. He straightened, only to bend forward again.

Inside Brak's mind a red mist congealed, but it was a rage without outlet. He tried to hurl a curse at the wizard, but no sound came from his lips. He struggled to break the force of the spell by holding his body motionless, but that was as futile as trying to

force movement on it. He could hear Garr laughing, and somewhere Nari was sobbing like a madwoman.

Brak strained his thews until pain screamed through his body, but he could not break the invisible vise of power that held him in a dog-like posture at Garr's feet. The laughter of the would-be prince went on rising until it subsided into a series of uncontrolled hiccoughs, as if the sight of Brak was becoming too hilarious to bear.

"Very well," Garr finally gasped. "Enough, Valonicus!"

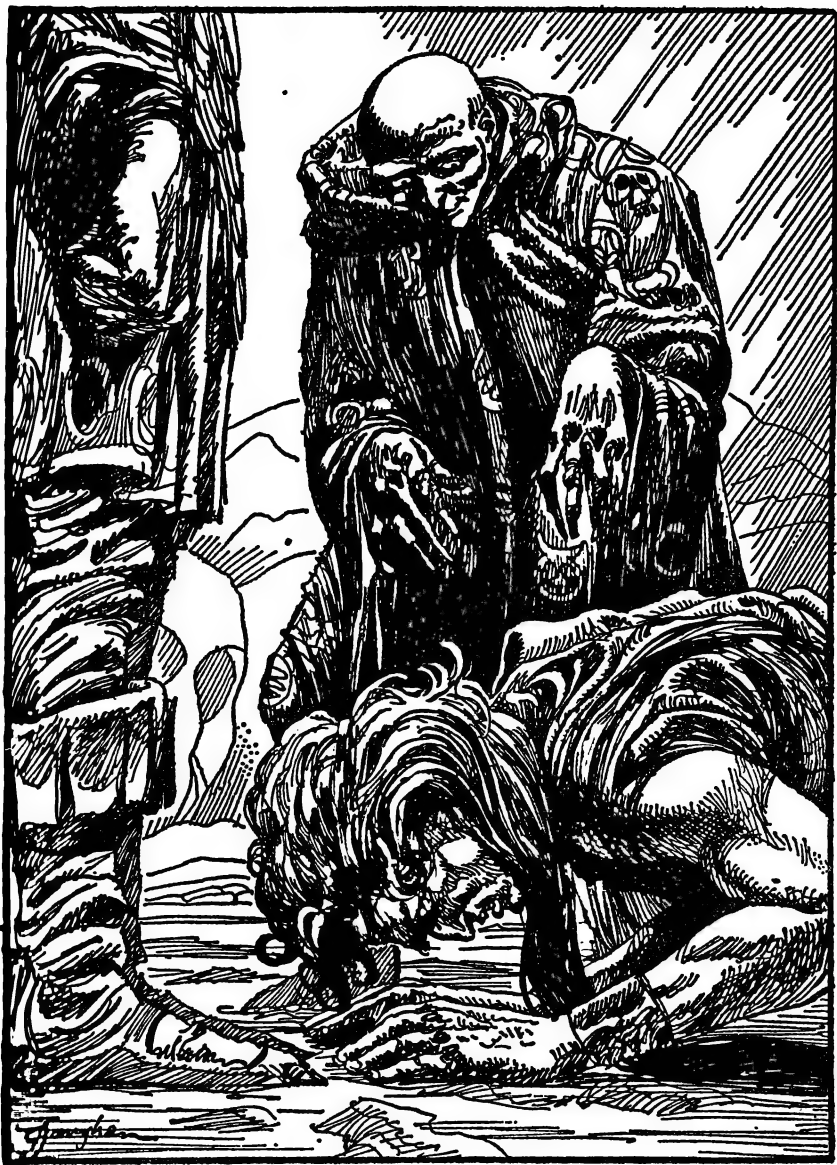
"Shall I release him for execution or leave him as he is, sire?" Valonicus asked.

"How long will your spell last?"

"Perhaps long enough for him to freeze to death in the snow. Or perhaps a little less. It should be amusing to have the poor fool spend his last minutes wondering whether he'll be able to move his body before the storm buries him. By the time it wears off, in any event, he'll be in no condition to trouble us."

"Then leave him as he is, by all means," Garr decided. He chuckled. "He'll make a pretty statue for travelers in the spring to wonder at."

Raising his voice, the Lord Garr began ordering his two remaining soldiers to resume their journey. One of them hastily disposed of his dead comrade while the other



tied Nari onto the back of a horse.

Brak's mind tried to move his eyes, but he had to depend on his ears for what happened next. He heard the accoutrements of animals jingling as they moved through the snow. Nari moaned as she was lifted onto the horse. Then he heard Valonicus observe that it would be prudent to strip the girl and bring forth the rest of the map by the only means left them as soon as they could find a convenient shelter.

Garr's laughter was the last sound Brak heard before they rode off. The man was obviously pleased and sure that he'd have the lost treasure by nightfall and the throne of Gilgamarch before the spring thaws.

Frozen on hands and knees, Brak felt the snow covering him.

VII

Presently, Brak heard the wind change direction and begin to die down. The snowfall diminished slowly to a trickle of flakes as the storm must be moving eastward and away. Barely within his view, he could see that the rugged walls of the Mountain of Smoke were standing forth again, except for clouds that hovered over the highest peaks in the east. A wan and chilly light poured down from the sun.

Immobilized in the position in which the spell had left him, Brak was barely able to blink his eyelids and knock the rime of frost from them. The distant pass was clearly visible now, as was the skull-like formation of ebony rock.

The big barbarian's mind seemed to be functioning well enough, but there was now no sensation in his body. He noticed the low angle of the sun from his own shadow cast on the snow. There was no more than an hour or two of daylight left. If his body wasn't already freezing with cold, the night would surely finish him.

Once more he strained his body, concentrating all his mind on the single task of lifting his right hand from the snow that buried it to well above the wrist.

Nothing moved. It was as though unyielding, invisible iron encased him.

He tried again, groaning inwardly, straining and writhing with the effort he exerted to stir the slightest bit of motion out of his numbed hand. There was no response, though now he could feel the pain of his efforts more strongly.

Rage rose in his mind, until the world turned red in front of him. It spread through him, bringing a flood of pain that only increased the mounting anger. He'd never die until he could see Garr and Valonicus dying like curs at his feet!

He cursed himself and tried to

raise his fist toward his foes in the ancient gesture of habit.

Abruptly, he felt the knuckles of the hand bend. Within the snow, he could now feel that the flattened fingers had curled and lifted from the frozen ground. But a second effort to make a fist yielded no results.

His mind was still seething with fury, but it was a cold rage now, refined beyond any anger he had ever felt. He could feel the strength gathering in him and he conserved it, thinking of how that hidden hand would look if he curled his fingers against his palm. And finally, when every detail of the motion was clear in his mind, he released his strength in a burst.

For a moment, he seemed to be succeeding. Then the effort was spent, and his hand lay flat upon the ground again.

He groaned in frustration — and the sound was suddenly loud in his ears. It was the first cry to pass between his lips since the incantation of Valonicus had wrenched him into this craven pose.

Again he gathered his strength and willed his fingers to bend, *hand*. His teeth ground together and his whole body ached with the strain. A piercing pain struck between his eyes, almost blackening out his mind.

And the fingers bent slowly, slowly . . .

They touched his frozen palm, and his hand was a fist.

Harsh laughter broke from his lips, and this time the fist raised slightly — raised and shook!

The pain between his eyes grew stronger, but he refused to give in to it now. If pain was the price of movement, then every bit of pain was precious!

It took long minutes before he could force his arm to throw him sideways from his kneeling position. It took longer and gave him more trouble before he could straighten his legs and his back. The pain increased, forcing him to stop and rest between efforts. But every time the pain stopped him, he called back to his mind the laughter of Lord Garr, the yellow eyes of Valonicus, and the moan of the girl as her abductors carried her away. Bit by bit, he brought his body under control.

His shadow was long on the snow when he stood upright.

He had expected to find his hands frozen from the long exposure to the cold of the ground. But now as he moved about carefully, he felt none of the numbness he had feared. His fingers tingled slightly, but that was a good sign. Maybe the rage he felt had kept his circulation going strongly enough to save them. Or maybe the spell of Valonicus was partly potent against even such changes as the freezing of his flesh.

He rubbed the aching muscles of his neck and stared at the pass toward which they had gone and the skull-rock that marked the way toward their goal. He had to choose one as his path.

Prudence dictated a speedy march to the pass. But prudence had lost the battle long before, while he lay trapped in the spell and fighting to make a fist of defiance. He was worried about Nari, but there was more at stake than merely saving a strange girl with a living treasure map on her back.

No man from the high steppes and wild lands of the north could be made to grovel without someone paying dearly!

His body was still shaky and hard to control, but he could move fairly well now. He began searching the snow for his broadsword. At length he found it at the bottom of a drift, and a howl of satisfaction came from his lips.

With the lion tail and the savage yellow braid of hair swinging free behind him, he began to climb through the knee-deep drifts, humming a tuneless melody from the hate songs of his ancestors. His face was set toward the target of the skull-rock perhaps two leagues distant, and he increased his speed toward it as the last of the spell wore away.

Valonicus had said that the big barbarian might endure the spell

to its ending with some life in him, but hardly that Brak would have enough vitality to give chase. But then, the wizard had cast no spells to test the weather and had not expected the abrupt change, though such changes seemed to plague these forlorn peaks at the eastern edge of the world.

Little additional snow had fallen after they left Brak behind, and he had no difficulty in following the tracks of the riders and their dozen pack animals.

He worked his way steadily upwards, departing from the trail in order to survey its next bending from a convenient crag. The day was ending, and the light was already waning. The sky had turned a cold, deep blue. Now the first stars emerged.

Brak began to worry about losing the trail in the dark. The wind still shifted the snow about, making constant observation necessary to spot the marks the animals had made. With the coming of night, he would have to move a step at a time, stopping to peer closely for the signs. They could easily escape him then if the wind kept playing with the tracks or if more snow began to fall.

Then Brak stood up, and a wolfish grin came to his lips. He wasn't far behind, after all. The wind had carried a sound to his ears that could only be the voice of one of Garr's soldiers. Then other sounds

came, indicating that both men were shouting angrily at themselves or at their animals.

Brak's wonder at what difficulty they were having was soon answered as he edged forward to the lip of an icy promontory. With the wind flattening his cheeks, he studied the gorge below.

In the deep shadows down there, he could make out the two men wrestling with the train of pack animals. The second pair of beasts had become stuck in a small landslide, leaving all but the lead pair to mill about aimlessly behind them, jerking on their tethers but unable to pass on. Most of the packs had already been stripped, and the men were trying to transfer the burdens from the last animals past the struggling pair that had been trapped. Obviously they were using the free lead animals to carry everything ahead before they began the difficult task of disposing of those trapped and leading the others around the rubble that had fallen across the trail.

That meant that the Lord Garr and Valonicus must have gone on to find a camp site for the night.

High above the struggle, Brak wondered how he could slip past the gorge, outrun the soldiers, and come upon the two he wanted while they were unguarded. He leaned far over, studying the path. Then, as he pulled back, his elbow struck an icy rock. It spiralled

down into the gorge and clattered against the side of the cliff below.

VIII

The men below raised their heads, and one threw up a hand to point to the barbarian. Brak was sliding backwards as the other soldier nocked an arrow to his bow and sent it whistling.

The arrow missed as Brak ducked. But in his haste to escape it, he threw his body too far to the side. His foot skidded on the icy surface and his left side slipped off the promontory's edge. He could feel himself slipping over, and fear thickened in him as he fought for balance.

He flung out his hands to catch the edge as he fell and his fingertips slipped painfully on the ice-covered rock. Now he needed every vestige of strength in his great hands as he squeezed down, trying to find a firmer grip. Somehow, he held on, dangling in the air with his broadsword slapping against his thigh.

The soldiers were howling in glee. Both had arrows nocked, and in another moment the big barbarian's body would be pierced through by at least one of them. He struggled futilely to pull himself upwards —

There was a sudden creaking sound from the promontory and he felt something vibrate. Turning his

head carefully, he could make out a fissure that was beginning to appear across the middle above him. In a few seconds, the whole ledge was going to break off and crash down into the gorge.

As he turned his eyes back, he saw one arrow flashing toward him. The arrow dug a channel of blood through his right calf. And the other soldier was getting set for another shot.

No chance was good, but his eyes and mind had been busy hunting for the least certain way to death. Now he began to sway, exerting all his strength, kicking and hauling his free swinging legs back and forth until his body was a pendulum. An arrow hissed through the air to one side of his head. He cursed and swung harder. The fissure widened and cracked.

A split second before the promontory broke, Brak let go. He plunged downwards and a little sideways, to where a tiny ledge offered a grip for his hands. He couldn't hang onto it, but it slowed his fall and let him swing to the side again, where there was a rough area that he could use to brake his downward plunge. Finally he struck with jarring force into a deep snowbank.

The promontory tumbled past him, falling end over end like a juggernaut. One of the soldiers screamed, but the other watched silently, with an open mouth. It

struck, raising clouds of snow. The pack animals went mad, biting their tracelines, stamping, kicking and rearing.

Brak clambered from the snow, shaking his head to clear it of dizziness. His hands were sore with a hundred scratches, and blood leaked from his bare leg to leave a trail on the white crust of snow as he skidded and stumbled to the bottom of the gorge.

He pulled his broadsword, giving his first attention to the animals. He slashed the traces of those still alive and cut the lines between each pair. Freed, they bolted up the trail.

For a long moment, Brak stared down by the ruin left by the fallen promontory. Two men and two animals had been crushed beneath it. Blood and brains oozed from under one edge. A hand and boot heel protruded from one side, and a snapped bow lay nearby.

Now the odds weighed a little less heavily against him. Brak decided as he clutched his sword and limped up the trail. His wounded leg was weakening and it was questionable how long he could use it for what had to be done. Already the flow of blood from it was weakening him. For the first time since breaking the spell of Valonius, he felt the bite of the deepening cold of evening. His teeth clicked together.

But he forced himself on, ignoring the pain of his leg and the stinging of other scrapes and bruises.

His attention was less sharp than usual, however. Somehow, he took a false turn at one point in his efforts to follow the trail and wasn't aware of it until he stumbled up a narrow gorge to where it ended in a blank, icy wall. Then he was forced to turn back and hunt for the place where he had gone wrong.

But by the time the moon was shedding its faint light on the landscape, he came at last to a break in the rocky terrain. He crept into hiding behind a large ice-covered boulder, to peer out cautiously at the scene below.

A snow covered valley of some size stretched away to where the rock walls of the Mountains of Smoke rose again. Halfway up the face of the distant cliff, the peculiar black skull-rock formation gleamed.

The yellow floor was bisected by an immense crevasse. To the nearer side of the crevasse, two fur pavilions were pitched. For a moment, Brak wondered whether that meant they had already found the location of the treasure. But if so, there was no sign of excitement around the camp. A single horse was tethered outside the tents, and from the distance it looked like the big mount belonging to Lord Garr.

Within one of the pavilions, a fire shone brightly.

Brak watched for a few minutes without seeing any sign of activity and then he slowly crept out of his hiding place. He moved down the snowy slope to the valley floor, making sure he disturbed no rocks that could slide downwards with warning of his presence. The wind was from the wrong direction, so he could hear little or nothing from the fur pavilions.

It was Garr's big stallion that was tethered outside. At the man's approach, the animal snorted fretfully. Brak bent close to the ground, aware that there was no real cover for him on the unbroken crust of snow. There was enough moonlight to make his gray cloak instantly visible against the whiteness around. He could not fail to be discovered by anyone who emerged from the pavilion.

His heart began to beat faster and a few drops of blood that still fell from his wounded leg marked the snow black where he passed. But the scent of being close to his quarry helped to wipe some of the muzziness from his mind and gave him the strength to prowl forward one silent step at a time.

Garr's stallion stamped against the snow and blew out a cloud of steamy breath. Brak stopped his advance, watching for signs that the animal had detected him. He

started forward again, and then cursed himself.

The idea should have hit him long before, even in his pain-dulled condition. There were two men, but only one horse was here. Where was the wizard Valonicus?

Brak had seen no signs of him on the trail he'd taken up the last gorge. While he had been exploring that, the wizard could have ridden by unnoticed, perhaps to see what had become of the soldiers and the pack animals. And that would mean that Valonicus could be anywhere behind him now.

As the big barbarian turned his flesh crawled at what he saw. His guess had been correct, but far too late.

Near the boulder where Brak had hidden to survey the valley, the wizard sat on his horse. There was no way to tell how long he had been sitting there watching Brak's stealthy advance toward the tents. Now that he was discovered, however, Valonicus dug his soft tooled boots against the sides of his horse and began to canter forward.

Brak yanked out his broadsword, licking his lips that were suddenly dry. Valonicus' horse kicked up puffs of snow, and the wizard's yellow eyes grew larger and more compelling as he drew nearer. He rode with no sign of a weapon in his hand, against a barbarian with his sword at ready.

Yet he came straight on toward Brak, neither rushing too rapidly nor seeming to hesitate.

The yellow eyes flashed with their evil humor and the bony mouth smirked. Now there were only a hundred paces between them, then only fifty.

At thirty paces, Valonicus pulled an object from beneath his robe — something that flashed and glared in the light of the moon. Brak recognized it from Nari's description as the cheap two-sided glass of enchantment.

Valonicus flicked the mirror with one of his long nails and sent it spinning furiously.

IX

Still twenty paces away. Valonicus reined in, still holding the spinning mirror before him. Brak heard the deep whistling sound he remembered with horror from the cave.

Try as he would, the barbarian seemed unable to stare anywhere but into the blurring disc of the mirror. For fragmented seconds he saw his own image reflected in it, and the hair on the nape of his neck rose.

"So you followed us after all," Valonicus called. His voice seemed to echo from an immense distance. "Outlanders are sometimes noted for their stamina, but not for their wits. Well, you'll go no further."

"Get down and fight!" Brak challenged him. "Stand down like a man!"

"Nonsense," Valonicus replied. "I never fight when others will do it for me. Others, such as barbarians!"

His voice rose to a taunt on the last words. The mirror spun and spun, forming a blinding bar of silver light across Brak's vision.

With a low growl, Brak charged at the wizard.

He had taken only three steps when a radiant gray cloud materialized before him. He choked with horror as the cloud took on shape and coalesced into a shambling, transparent figure with a huge sword clutched in its hand.

Brak reeled back. He recognized the planes of the phantom's face and the long yellow braid that was swinging down behind the phantom's cloak. There was even the familiar tuft of the lion tail dangling below the hide garment the phantom seemed to wear.

Brak knew that this phantom was himself.

The mirror spun, and a second cloud sprang up. A second ghostly Brak appeared, with stars glimmering through his transparent skull.

Valonicus' finger sent the disc spinning faster, and there was another phantom. Then a fourth appeared. The mouths of the apparitions opened on savage clenched teeth.

In his travels, Brak had thought he had faced almost every possible opponent. But he had never been forced to battle against himself.

Now there were a score of the cloudy things, each with his own appearance, each mimicking his advances. Valonicus had nearly disappeared behind the line of marching ghosts. Only his yellow eyes and the silvery flare of the revolving mirror could be seen.

Brak took a tighter grip on his broadsword and charged into the line of shadow-creatures, praying to the nameless gods of his youth. He hacked out wildly, bent on slaughter.

But his judgment had failed him again, as his first touch of broadsword to apparition proved. The terrible force emanating from the phantoms jolted him, lifting him and flinging him a great distance, to crash down in the snow with an uncontrollable yell of pain.

His sword was useless against the creatures of the demon glass. It was worse than useless — it was a weapon for their use.

Now the specters changed direction, shambling toward the big barbarian as he clawed out of the snowheap and faced them with the futile sword dangling from his numbed hand. The apparitions came on steadily, forcing Brak to back away. There was no way to strike against them. And once they

gripped him with the massed force of the emanations, he would almost certainly be torn apart and flung in pieces across the whole snowy fastness of the valley.

While the keening, whistling sound of the mirror grew louder, the phantoms advanced steadily, forcing Brak to retreat reluctant step by step.

With the only faint hope he had, Brak began to work his way left. The phantoms kept coming, floating a hand's width above the snowy crust and ever nearer. He knew he was close to death, and somehow the knowledge steadied him.

From the corner of his eye, the barbarian saw that Valonicus still sat his horse in the same spot where he had begun his attack. Brak continued his steady retreat, but now he let little moaning sounds slip from his mouth, loud enough for Valonicus to hear and enjoy over the keening of the mirror. Summoning an imitation of terror wasn't hard. He literally had to fight himself to keep from screaming at the sight of the ghastly phalanx of transparent images of himself marching steadily closer.

Suddenly he heard the jingle of the harness on Valonicus' horse. The wizard had either sensed the tactic or grown anxious for a different view. He had the reins in his hands now, prepared to ride out of range.

Brak spun around. With the knowledge of the nearness of the apparitions driving him toward panic, the big barbarian called on the skills he had learned as a youth in the high steppes. He slid his palm around on the hilt of the big broadsword and flung the massive weapon like a lance.

The wizard cursed and reared his horse. His yellow eyes were burning like bonfires as the broadsword tumbled toward him, making a slow end over end motion through the air as it shot upward. Valonicus' mount leaped forward, but too late. The tumbling sword struck the mirror and shattered it in the wizard's hand.

The apparitions exploded in puffs of sound and smoke.

Valonicus shrieked. His eyes turned bright red, and from the hand that had held the mirror a column of flame spurted skyward. There was a hissing and the screaming voice of Valonicus as the wizard's hand began to char and melt away, going up in steam and dripping onto the snow. Where the droplets fell, the crust sent up little clouds of hot vapor.

The stallion was bucking wildly, but the wizard stayed in the saddle somehow, and the unburned hand groped into a pouch at his side, his reddened eyes blazing toward Brak. The sorcerer should have been dead.

Brak had charged after his sword. Now he scooped it up in both hands, raising it high as he charged. His leap carried him high above the ground, and the sword began arcing downwards, just as Valonicus withdrew a long-nailed hand from the pouch.

The big broadsword went through the wizard's skull with almost no resistance, carrying downward to cleave into a shoulder and out as Brak's leap carried him to the left.

A single horrible cry wailed upwards toward the sky, seeming to lose itself among the stars. Then the stallion was plunging forward madly, with the corpse of Valonicus still clinging to the saddle. The horse plunged toward the fur pavilion just as the Lord Garr was emerging.

Garr held a dagger in his hand, and he was dragging Nari with him. The girl was naked from the waist upwards. Neither was looking toward the scene of Brak's victory.

Valonicus' horse thundered straight toward the firelit pavilion with the wizard still in the saddle. The burned stump of an arm flapped loosely at his side and the horse charged on, unheeding of what lay ahead.

Lord Garr and Nari were directly in the path of the beast when the usurper prince finally looked up. He cried out and thrust Nari

aside as Valonicus came roaring past, and the wild hooves of the animal just missed him as the horse ripped through the fur pavilion scattering coals of fire.

The dead wizard and the fear-crazed mount raced on toward the crevasse that lay just a short distance beyond the tents. They reached the edge of the chasm with no slackening of speed. Briefly, like a macabre dancer, the horse pawed the emptiness beneath him. Then with a piercing animal scream of terror, they disappeared.

For many moments, the scream echoed and re-echoed to show the depth of the crevasse. Then it was stilled.

X

Something flickered brightly, and Brak turned to see Nari struggling with Garr. The light from the overturned fire glinted from a dagger in her hand which she must have seized from him when his attention was diverted by the horse. Brak cried out and began running toward the fight.

But it was over before he could reach them. Nari had the dagger above her head, bringing it down awkwardly. Lord Garr's head was back and he was off balance. He threw up an arm to ward off the blow. Nari rammed the dagger into his throat and twisted it ferociously.

Blood poured from Garr's mouth. He took three staggering steps and smashed face downward into the snow.

Weak and numbed by the wound in his leg, Brak stumbled toward the corpse that had been Lord Garr. Nari was bent over it, pulling the dagger free of the dead man's neck. Brak had a quick glimpse of her back. It was now completely covered from the base of the neck to the base of the spine with the strange markings. On this living map he recognized the valley and the crevasse that were overlooked by the skull-rock.

Then he got a better look and swore in sick disgust. The map was complete — but the lower half of her back was covered with raw blisters. He could guess the reason for the fire in the pavilion now!

Nari faced him with the knife dripping in her hand. If she felt pain, she gave no sign of it.

"Lord Garr found the map," she told him. "He got it without the potion, as Valonicus told him he could. He did it by himself, and he liked doing it!"

"I saw." Brak had trouble standing, and his legs were growing more wobbly by the minute. "Well, now the treasure belongs to you and no one else. The rest of them are all dead. Come on, girl. There may be something in the wizard's tent to heal you."

Nari gave a strange laugh. "Nothing can heal me. The Lord Garr used me ill in his tent. He beat me and mocked me. He told me what I really meant to him. And he laid hands on my body — "

She began to shudder. And suddenly. Brak became aware of an odd singsong note in her voice, like that of a child crooning to a doll.

"The treasure of Tobool was left to me by my father," she crooned. "And now it is mine. Lord Garr wants to take it away from me, but he can't have it. He's a man. He's greedy — "

Brak frowned at her, slowly realizing that the ruin of her life's dream, the nightmare experiences of the last few days, and finally the tortures of this night had driven her to a kind of madness. He sighed wearily, wondering how he could cope with her and get her to let him treat her back. As he was thinking, Nari attacked him. His response was uncertain and his leg moved stiffly as he tried to evade her. He skidded as the dagger flashed for his face. He wrenched his head aside, but the knife-point raked the bridge of his nose. If he had been a trifle slower, it would have torn out his eye.

She began backing away, more rapidly than he could keep up with her. Smoke was gusting into his face, and he saw that the fur pavilion of Lord Garr had started to

burn, probably from one of the wind-blown coals. Nari backed through it with no sign that she could feel the heat.

Brak had to detour around the fire, and she was further from him when he saw her again. She was still backing away from him. He called softly, trying to make his voice soothing to her. "Don't go that way, girl. All I want is to make you feel better. You're sick."

"Yes," she agreed. She nodded sagely with a little girl's wisdom. "Sick. All men are sick. Greedy and nasty and sick."

"Nari, stop!"

His cry was useless. She gave another backward skip away from him. Retreating, she overstepped the lip of the crevasse. Her scream was a long time dying.

Dawn broke clear and piercingly cold. Brak had already risen and bundled himself in extra cloaks from the pavilion of Valonicus. He ate from rations he found there and helped himself to a small pouch of coins. Then he tramped back across the valley floor in search of his broadsword and Lord Garr's stallion.

The horse had broken its picket-rope during the height of the confusion the preceding night, but it came when he called and whinnied when he stroked its head.

Sleep and food had refreshed him, and his wound was closed

now. But an immense weariness filled the big barbarian as he rode the stallion to the lip of the crevasse. This morning, with the sun glaring behind the Mountains of Smoke, it was possible to see down into the vast chasm.

On a floor of ice which spread across the crevasse far below he made out the remains of Valonicus' horse. Nearby lay the body of the wizard. Ironically, Nari had fallen quite near the sorcerer. One outflung hand rested across his mouth as if she were caressing his face in death.

Most of the ice was rough and covered with snow. But where the horse had landed, a great ledge of it had been splintered off. There the ice was clear — so clear that Brak could plainly see the dazzle of metal ingots of gold and the jewelled spillage of carved chests.

Brak was the only living man who even knew such a treasure existed now.

He would leave it to its dead.

The black skull-rock guarding the valley seemed to frown at him. He shuddered and drew his warm cloak up tight around his neck, making the bag of coins jingle against his broadsword. Gently he urged the stallion away from the lip of the precipice.

Brak said Nari's name once aloud. Then he rode onward across the shining ice and the cloud-blown pass to freedom. END

DEATH IS A LONELY PLACE

by BILL WARREN

*He was doomed by an ancient curse
to possess the love of any woman!*

The sun was setting over the Parkline Cemetery; a fog crept in ragged shrouds over the weathered stones. Toward the rear of the graveyard loomed a dull gray tomb, sheathed in dark-leaved ivy. The tomb door was barred by an iron gate, rusty but with freshly-oiled hinges.

Inside the vault, a long cement crypt stood on a pedestal in the center of the room; the lid had long since fallen to the floor, and a polished mahogany coffin was now exposed to the air.

As the rays of the sunset left the sky, the lid of the coffin slowly rose until it was stopped by the side of

the cement crypt. Within the silk-lined box lay an unbreathing, youthful man, his eyes shut. His straight dark hair swept back from the high forehead, and his cheeks were the faded color of old ivory.

After the sunlight had vanished completely, the man's eyelids fluttered open, and his chest began to rise and fall. He lay for a moment breathing slowly, then pulled himself upright and stepped out of the sarcophagus.

The slender man walked unhurriedly to the single barred window and gazed out at the misty dusk. It had been an unhappy day, he thought. It would be a worse night.

He turned and sat on the grimy window sill, staring at the rusted plate affixed to the crypt.

MIKLOS SOKOLOS

Born - 1896 Died - 1924

"Flights of Angels Sing Thee to Thy Rest"

Angels! thought Miklos bitterly. Rest!

When his parents had buried him, they had supposed that he would moulder into a skeleton by now, more than 40 years later. But because of the curse inflicted upon him, Miklos Sokolos was one of the Undead — a vampire.

Through the long years since his burial, he had cursed the recessive genes that had been passed on by his parents to combine in him so cruelly. Science would someday learn, perhaps. But it was already too late to spare him his ancestral fate.

He knew full well how the Undead could be destroyed, but he could never bring himself to it. Having lost true life, he feared to give up even the semblance of it. Never for him would be the agonizing thrust of the stake, nor the searing glare of ordinary sunlight. Bravery was not one of his gifts.

For a short while longer, Miklos gazed at his epitaph, then turned to the iron gate, swung it silently open and carefully closed it behind him. He strode away from the tomb without looking back.

He walked rapidly through the wet grass and the fog, oblivious of the granite blocks about him. In the past, he had wished they had buried him in a sealed coffin, to free him of his nocturnal wanderings; but he had now decided that even drinking blood was better than being imprisoned in the earth through the long nights and longer years, vainly hoping to slake the unending thirst. To him, thirst was a yearning in his throat, a hope rather than a dryness. He needed something to slide warmly over the tongue and down the gullet to stop the desire — something hot and heavy. Blood.

He approached the gate of the cemetery and wished once again for the shape-shifting powers of the legendary vampire, so that he could change to a bat and fly over the fence, or to a wolf and burrow under it, or to a mist and drift through it. But Miklos could do none of these things; as always, he climbed over the spiked rails.

He stood on the other side, waiting for a passing car to flag down, but there were none. It was perhaps better this way, he decided. He had not been able to find blood the night before, and his thirst was worse than usual. He feared he might attack the driver of a friendly car.

The fog was resolving itself into a misty rain; he turned his collar up and started his long walk to

the slums. He licked his needle fangs knowing relief lay ahead.

Puddles of water had formed in low patches of the sidewalk, and he splashed drearily through them, his eyes focused dimly ahead, his mind dimly on the past.

Miklos thought of his 40-year source of blood — the lonely women of the streets. He had paid them for a purpose other than the usual one, using money he had spent years learning to steal from stores and theaters and drunken men. To avoid detection, he spread his activities widely among the slums, never returning to the same woman twice in the space of several months, so that none of them ever died of his visits. As for the sting of his fangs — most of them were familiar with habits much stranger than nips on the neck.

He was thoroughly wet when he finally reached the unclean districts, and had to break into a clothing store for replacements. When he emerged, he saw a girl with her back to him across the street. Her dress was tight and gleaming black, and she carried a silvery purse. The rain had turned again to fog, and the figure under the street light was caught in a hazy golden glow.

Miklos stopped on the corner opposite her, then stepped from the curb, whistling softly across the glistening street. As he approached, the girl dropped her cigarette and turned to meet the vampire.

Damn, Miklos thought despairingly, she's only a child. The girl grinned at the young-looking man and placed a fresh cigarette between her scarlet lips. "Hey mister," she whispered. "Got a light?"

As he lit the cigarette from the lighter he always carried, Miklos wondered briefly how things had been managed before matches and cigarettes were invented. "Let's go to your place," he suggested apathetically. "You wouldn't like mine."

Short hours later, Miklos sat in the drabness of her room, tying his shoes. He saw the form on the bed across from him shift slightly; a moment later, thin fingers reached out, as if searching for him.

Miklos's body tensed sharply and he snapped a shoelace. He shut his eyes, as if doing so would cause him to forget the most terrible part of his curse — that every woman his fangs kissed thought she loved him, until her body managed to restore the blood it had lost. But the attempt to forget was useless.

He stood up, his gut in torment, as though the blood he had stolen was trying to return to its rightful owner. He lurched to the door of the room, and paused to regain his balance. With one hand on the knob, he stared back at the soft white figure sprawled grotesquely on the bed. The girl had passed out from the reaction to her loss of blood.

Jerking his wallet out of his pocket, he threw a crumpled twenty-dollar bill onto the bed, and stepped out the door, slamming it loudly behind him.

At an all-night movie a few blocks later, Miklos sat alone in the rear of the balcony, sobbing and clenching his face in his hands.

"Oh God, please not again; help me, please not again, not ever again! Please help me. Help me — to die," he moaned again and again, rocking forward and back in the worn theater seat. But the God his ancestors had denied would not hear his long years of prayers.

The next night, his remorse had left him slightly, and even the terrible hunger had not returned in force, leaving him with a hollow feeling that gnawed but did not overwhelm. He wandered the streets for hours, searching for some unwitting victim more out of habit than urgent need. But no figures lounged under street lights, no girls whispered from darkened doorways.

In desperation, he sought out another all-night theater, hoping to catch some late movie-goer unaware. It had to be soon, for the sun would be coming up in a few hours. He paid for his ticket and started in the door. Suddenly, a blow struck him from behind, and he turned to discover a small brunette sprawled on the lobby floor. She was giggling.

Miklos reached down to help her up. They said, "I'm sorry," in uni-

son, and Miklos found himself laughing for the first time since his burial. "I really *am* sorry," he apologized as the girl stood up. "I suppose I stopped right in your way."

"Oh no," she replied quickly. "I was late for work and wasn't watching where I was going." She smiled, revealing pleasantly uneven teeth.

"Uh, do you work here?"

The girl was stooping to retrieve several textbooks that Miklos hadn't noticed before. As he bent to help her, she said, "Yes, I'm the one-to-seven usherette, though there aren't usually very many people to usher. But I do get paid." She rose, embracing several of the books. "And that helps."

Miklos took the books from her and asked, "Where do you want these?"

"Oh, just bring them in here." The girl walked bouncily into a doorway behind the refreshment stand; Miklos followed her.

"Set them down there, please," the girl said, indicating a chair. She took off her overcoat and hung it on a hook, then opened a small door on the inside of which hung — a mirror!

Miklos groaned, twisting in pain as the reflecting surface swung toward him. He lurched out of the room and sat down heavily on a plush seat, then began to gasp for breath.

After a moment, he realized the girl was standing beside him, and looked up to discover her green eyes peering worriedly into his. Miklos turned away quickly, because just for a moment he had not seen her as a prospective food source, but as a girl. He couldn't afford to feel that way about anyone.

He became slowly aware of her gentle voice. She was asking him what was wrong. "Are you all right? Can I get you anything?"

Yes, he thought bitterly, A cup of blood would do nicely. But he said, "No, it's all right. I just get these attacks occasionally." Which was true, but how could he explain to her that it was only a mirror that had attacked him?

"I'll go in and watch the movie," he alibied, as he rose unsteadily to his feet. Pushing through the curtain, he entered the flickering darkness and began to grope for a seat. When he stumbled slightly, he was somewhat shocked to find the girl's arm supporting him.

"Here's a place," she whispered, lowering him into a seat on the aisle. She sat next to him. "I'll stay with you a while until I'm sure you're all right."

"But what about the other customers?"

"There's no one else here."

In spite of his growing premonition, Miklos didn't protest further. And in spite of her duties and his

thirst, they sat and talked quietly through a feature, the cartoon, and the coming attractions.

Her name, he discovered, was Gwen Edwards. She was a student working her way through a nearby college. Gwen was twenty and was not married, engaged, going steady, or carrying on a correspondence with any men. An orphan, she had been raised from early childhood by an aunt who had recently died. The aunt had left Gwen a considerable amount of money, but there was some difficulty in getting the will probated. Until this was done, she was working at the theater.

Miklos invented a fictitious name and background for himself, so that to Gwen he was John Bowman, a writer who was awake by night and asleep by day in order to research a novel.

Gwen left from time to time to seat other customers, but always returned to sit beside Miklos. But when the second feature was over and the cartoon began, he noticed that the sun would rise in an hour. He stood to leave, and Gwen rose with him. She looked into his face and suggested softly, "The feature changes tomorrow night."

"Yes," he replied uneasily. He gazed at Gwen's face. How beautiful, he thought. Her features were illuminated by shifting washes of color from the cartoon, and he could feel her pulse beat rapidly. But he didn't release her hands.

Her eyes closed, and she tilted her face upward to be kissed. Instead of her cherry lips, Miklos saw only her soft white throat and knew what lay beneath. He dropped her hands and dashed out the exit.

Miklos lay in his coffin, shakingly indecisive. His meal of two nights ago might be able to keep him going for several more nights, but he couldn't choose between filling his stomach to be sure, or to return to Gwen at the theater.

As he was climbing over the cemetery fence, he decided.

When Gwen arrived at work, she found him waiting.

That night, for the first time since his death, Miklos Sokolos kissed a girl with no thought of taking blood from her body.

As Miklos entered his tomb that morning, his mind was churning with plans. He lay down in the coffin and closed the lid. If he drank Gwen's blood — *all* of it — they could be together; it would take several nights, but then they would be together for always. Just before his daily death swept over him, he thought what he really hadn't dared to think before. Drinking all her blood would make her a vampire.

But they would be together.

When he awoke the next night, the thought of sating his thirst didn't occur to him.

He leaped over the fence and discovered a taxi a few blocks away. Miklos stepped out of the cab at Gwen's apartment building, and dashed through the doors and up several steps at a time. He threw open her apartment door and swept Gwen into his arms.

They lay together in a chair for several hours; then he bent gently, tenderly toward her throat.

It was hours later when Miklos extricated himself carefully from Gwen's arms. He crept to the door and looked back at the girl's figure, lying in exhausted sleep. She was breathing softly and a smile touched her lips. On her throat were twin tiny punctures.

Just a few more nights, he thought, and they would be together throughout all time. Miklos smiled. She's lovely, so lovely, so dear, so . . .

His smile froze. So alive. The smile faded slowly from his taut lips as he realized what her existence would become. She would be buried in the dank earth and would rise every night to wander the streets as a blood-sucking fiend — like himself. And he knew in one hideous flash how she would be forced to get her blood. *She* would be the seductive form under the streetlight, and *her* victim would be the lustful stranger with a match.

Miklos carefully spread the blanket over Gwen's still form and kissed her softly on the cheek. He

switched off the light and closed her door quietly behind him. Crossing to the desk, he wrote a brief note, leaving it on her usherette's uniform.

Thanks, Gwen baby. I've known a few in my time, but you're one of the best. Just consider yourself lucky my wife didn't find out about you, like she did all the others. And remember, don't forget to look up my book when it comes out. You'll rate a whole chapter. Good-bye. Don't try to get in touch with me.

Your grateful
John

Miklos stood looking down at his open coffin where it lay on the dark grass. He was sweating, and the heavy wooden box itself was damp with dew. In the pre-dawn grayness, he could see the coffin lid where he had torn it off, just outside his ivy-embraced tomb. At his feet lay the iron plate

from the sarcophagus; the second line now read: "Born — 1896 Died — 1924 and 1964." The last had taken several hours to carve with a mallet and chisel.

With a parting wave at his tomb, he raised the end of the heavy coffin and placed it against a tree, facing the east. He climbed inside and lay back.

From the yellowness over the low range of hills, he could see that it was going to be a pleasant day. Miklos smiled again and hugged his stolen picture of Gwen a little closer to his chest, dreamily watching the rays of the sun slanting up the sky.

The wooded valley in which the cemetery lay was in silvered shadow, the low hills were bathed in daffodil light at their summits, and the sky was a pale, cornflower blue.

Strange, he thought as the sky grew steadily brighter. I had forgotten entirely how beautiful a sunrise can be.

He closed his eyes.

END

This Month in IF

Special Novel Extract Supplement

CREATURES OF LIGHT

by Roger Zelazny

THE COMPUTER CONSPIRACY

by Mack Reynolds

NOW THAT MAN IS GONE

by James Blish

WHERE THE TIME WENT

by James Schmitz

—and many other stories and features, Don't Miss November IFI



by ROBERT SILVERBERG

*It was a fine car and a good buy,
even without the trunk. But there
was some question of who owned it.*

I

“As is,” the auto dealer said, jamming his thumbs under his belt. “Two hundred fifty bucks and drive it away. I’m not pretending it’s perfect, but I got to tell you, you’re getting a damned good hunk of car for the price.”

“As is,” Sam Norton said.

“As is. Strictly as is.”

Norton let the point pass. He walked around the car again, giving it a close look from all angles. It was a smallish dark green four-door sedan, with the finish and trim in good condition, a decent set of tires, and a general glow that comes only when a car has been well cared for.

The test drive had been fine.

There was only one small thing wrong with it. The trunk didn’t open. It wasn’t just a case of a jammed lock, either; somebody had fixed this car so the trunk *couldn’t* open. With great care the previous owner had apparently welded the trunk shut; nothing was visible back there except a dim line to mark the place where the lid might once have lifted.

What the hell, though. The car was otherwise in fine shape, and he wasn’t in a position to be too picky. Overnight, practically, they had transferred him to the Los Angeles office, which was fine in terms of getting out of New York in the middle of a lousy winter,

but not so good as far as his immediate finances went.

The company didn’t pay moving costs, only transportation; he had been handed four one-way tourist class tickets, and that was that. So he had put Ellen and the kids aboard the first jet to L.A., cashing in his own ticket so he could use the money for the moving job. He figured to do it the slow but cheap way: rent a U-Haul trailer, stuff the family belongings into it, and set out via turnpike for California, hoping that Ellen had found an apartment by the time he got there. Only he couldn’t trust his present clunker of a car to get him very far west of Parsippany, New Jersey, let alone through the Mojave Desert.

So here he was, trying to pick up an honest used job for about five hundred bucks, which was all he could afford to lay out on the spot.

And here was the man at the used car place offering him this very attractive vehicle — with its single peculiar defect — for only two and a half bills. Which would leave him with that much extra cash cushion for the expenses of his transcontinental journey. And he didn’t *really* need a trunk, driving alone. He could keep his suitcase on the back seat and stash everything else in the U-Haul. And it shouldn’t be all that hard to have some mechanic in L.A. cut the trunk

open for him and get it working again.

On the other hand, Ellen was likely to chew him out for having bought a car that was sealed up that way; she had let him have it before on other "bargains" of that sort. On the third hand, the mystery of the sealed trunk appealed to him. Who knew what he'd find in there once he opened it up? Maybe the car had belonged to a smuggler who had had to hide a hot cargo fast, and the trunk was full of lovely golden ingots, or diamonds, or ninety-year-old cognac, which the smuggler had planned to reclaim a few weeks later, except that something unexpected had come up. On the fourth hand —

The dealer said, "How'd you like to take her out for another test spin, then?"

Norton shook his head. "Don't think I need to. I've got a good idea of how she rides."

"Well, then, let's step into the office and close the deal."

Sidestepping the maneuver, Norton said, "What year did you say she was?"

"Oh, about a '64, '65."

"You aren't sure?"

"You can't really tell with these foreign jobs, sometimes. You know, they don't change the model for five, six, ten years in a row, except in little ways that only an expert would notice. Take Volkswagen, for instance —"

"And I just realized," Norton cut in, "that you never told me what make she is, either."

"Peugeot, maybe, or some kind of Fiat," said the dealer hazily. "One of those kind."

"You don't know?"

A shrug. "Well, we checked a lot of the style books going back a few years, but there are so damn many of these foreign cars around, and some of them they import only a few thousand, and — well, so we couldn't quite figure it out."

Norton wondered how he was going to get spare parts for a car of unknown make and uncertain date. Then he realized that he was thinking of the car as his, already, even though the more he considered the deal, the less he liked it. And then he thought of those ingots in the trunk. The rare cognac. The suitcase full of rubies and sapphires.

He said, "Shouldn't the registration say something about the year and make?"

The dealer shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Matter of fact, we don't have the registration. But it's perfectly legitimate. Hey, look, I'd like to get this car out of my lot, so maybe we call it two-twenty-five, huh?"

"It all sounds pretty mysterious. Where'd you get the car, anyway?"

"There was this little guy who brought it in, about a year ago, a year last November, I think it was.

Give it a valve job, he said. I'll be back in a month — got to take a sudden business trip. Paid in advance for tuneup and a month storage and everything. Wouldn't you know that was the last we ever saw of him? Well, we stored his damn car here free for ten, eleven months, but that's it, now we got to get it out of the place. The lawyer says we can take possession for the storage charge."

"If I buy it, you give me a paper saying you had the right to sell it?"

"Sure. Sure."

"And what about getting the registration? Shifting the insurance over from my old heap? All the red tape?"

"I'll handle everything," the dealer said. "Just you take the car outa here."

"Two hundred," Norton said. "As is."

The dealer sighed. "It's a deal. As is."

A light snow was falling when Norton began his cross-country begira three days later. It was an omen, but he was not sure what kind; he decided that the snow was intended as his last view of a dreary winter phenomenon he wouldn't be seeing again, for a while. According to the *Times*, yesterday's temperature range in L.A. had been 66 low, 79 high. Not bad for January.

He slouched down behind the wheel, let his foot rest lightly on the accelerator, and sped westward at a sane, sensible 45 mph. That was about as fast as he dared go with the bulky U-Haul trailing behind. He hadn't had much experience driving with a trailer — he was a computer salesman, and computer salesmen don't carry sample computers — but he got the hang of it pretty fast. You just had to remember that your vehicle was now a segmented organism, and make your turns accordingly.

God bless turnpikes, anyhow. Just drive on, straight and straight and straight, heading toward the land of the sunset with only a few gentle curves and half a dozen traffic lights along the way.

The snow thickened some. But the car responded beautifully, hugging the road, and the windshield wipers kept his view clear. He hadn't expected to buy a foreign car for the trip at all; when he had set out, it was to get a good solid Plymouth of Chevvie, something heavy and sturdy to take him through the wide open spaces.

But he had no regrets about this smaller car. It had as much power and pickup as he needed, and with that trailer bouncing along behind him he wouldn't have much use for all that extra horsepower, anyway.

He was in a cheerful, relaxed mood. The car seemed comforting

and protective, a warm enclosing environment that would contain and shelter him through the thousands of miles ahead. He was still close enough to New York to be able to get Mozart on the radio, which was nice. The car's heater worked well. There wasn't much traffic. The snow itself, new and white and fluffy, was all the more beautiful for the knowledge that he was leaving it behind. He even enjoyed the solitude.

It would be restful, in a way, driving on and on through Ohio and Kansas and Colorado or Arizona or whatever states lay between him and Los Angeles. Five or six days of peace and quiet, no need to make small talk, no kids to amuse —

His frame of mind began to darken not long after he got on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. If you have enough time to think, you will eventually think of the things you should have thought of before; and now, as he rolled through the thickening snow on this gray and silent afternoon, certain aspects of a trunkless car occurred to him that in his rush to get on the road he had succeeded in overlooking earlier. What about a tool kit, for instance? If he had a flat, what would be use for a jack and a wrench? That led him to a much more chilling thought: what would he use for a spare tire? A trunk

was something more than a cavity back of the rear seat; in most cars it contained highly useful objects.

None of which he had with him.

None of which he had even thought about, until just this minute.

He contemplated the prospects of driving from coast to coast without a spare tire and without tools, and his mood of warm security evaporated abruptly. At the next exit, he decided, he'd hunt for a service station and pick up a tire, fast. There would be room for it on the back seat next to his luggage. And while he was at it, he might as well buy —

The U-Haul, he suddenly observed, was jackknifing around awkwardly in back, as though its wheels had just lost traction. A moment later the car was doing the same and he found himself moving laterally in a beautiful skid across an unsanded slick patch on the highway.

Steer in the direction of the skid, that's what you're supposed to do, he told himself, strangely calm. Somehow he managed to keep his foot off the brake despite all natural inclinations, and watched in quiet horror as car and trailer slid placidly across the empty lane to his right and came to rest, upright and facing forward, in the piled-up snowbank along the shoulder of the road.

He let out his breath slowly,

scratched his chin, and gently fed some gas. The spinning wheels made a high-pitched whining sound against the snow. He went nowhere. He was stuck.

II

The little man had a ruddy-cheeked face, white hair so long it curled at the ends, and metal-rimmed spectacles. He glanced at the snow-covered autos in the used-car lot, scowled, and trudged toward the showroom.

"Came to pick up my car," he announced. "Valve job. Delayed by business in another part of the world."

The dealer looked uncomfortable. "The car's not here."

"So I see. Get it, then."

"We more or less sold it about a week ago."

"Sold it? Sold my car? *My car?*"

"Which you abandoned. Which we stored here for a whole year. This ain't no parking lot here. Look, I talked to my lawyer first, and he said —"

"All right. All right. Who was the purchaser?"

"A guy, he was transferred to California and had to get a car fast to drive out. He —"

"His name?"

"Look, I can't tell you that. He bought the car in good faith. You got no call bothering him now."

The little man said, "If I chose,

I could draw the information from you in a number of ways. But never mind. I'll locate the car easily enough. And you'll certainly regret this scandalous breach of custodial duties. You certainly shall."

He went stamping out of the showroom, muttering indignantly.

Several minutes later a flash of lightning blazed across the sky. "Lightning?" the auto dealer wondered. "In January? During a snow-storm?"

When the thunder came rumbling in, every pane of plate glass in every window of the showroom shattered and fell out in the same instant.

Sam Norton sat spinning his wheels for a while in mounting fury. He knew it did no good, but he wasn't sure what else he could do at this point, except hit the gas and hope for the car to pull itself out of the snow. His only other hope was for the highway patrol to come along, see his plight, and summon a towtruck. But the highway was all but empty, and those few cars that drove by shot past him without stopping.

When ten minutes had passed, he decided to have a closer look at the situation. He wondered vaguely if he could somehow scuff away enough snow with his foot to allow the wheels to get a little purchase. It didn't sound plausible, but there wasn't much else he could

do. He got out and headed to the back of the car.

And noticed for the first time that the trunk was open.

The lid had popped up about a foot, along that neat welded line of demarcation. In astonishment Norton pushed it higher and peered inside.

The interior had a dank, musty smell. He couldn't see much of what might be in there, for the light was dim and the lid would lift no higher. It seemed to him that there were odd lumpy objects scattered about, objects of no particular size or shape, but he felt nothing when he groped around. He had the impression that the things in the trunk were moving away from his hand, vanishing into the darkest corners as he reached for them. But then his fingers encountered something cold and smooth, and he heard a welcome clink of metal on metal. He pulled.

A set of tire chains came forth.

He grinned at his good luck. Just what he needed! Quickly he unwound the chains and crouched by the back wheels of the car to fasten them in place. The lid of the trunk slammed shut as he worked — hinge must be loose, he thought — but that was of no importance. In five minutes he had the chains attached.

Getting behind the wheel, he started the car again, fed some

gas, delicately let in the clutch, and bit down hard on his lower lip by way of helping the car out of the snowbank. The car eased forward until it was in the clear. He left the chains on until he reached a service area eight miles up the turnpike. There he undid them; and when he stood up, he found that the trunk had popped open again.

Norton tossed the chains inside and knelt in another attempt to see what else might be in the trunk; but not even by squinting did he discover anything. When he touched the lid, it snapped shut, and once more the rear of the car presented that puzzling welded-tight look.

Mine not to reason why, he told himself. He headed into the station and asked the attendant to sell him a spare tire and a set of tools. The attendant, frowning a bit, studied the car through the station window and said, "Don't know as we got one to fit. We got standards and we got smalls, but you got an in-between. Never saw a size tire like that, really."

"Maybe you ought to take a closer look," Norton suggested. "Just in case it's really a standard foreign-car size, and —"

"Nope. I can see from here. What you driving, anyway? One of them Japanese jobs?"

"Something like that."

"Look, maybe you can get a

tire in Harrisburg. They got a place there, it caters to foreign cars, get yourself a muffler, shocks, anything you need."

"Thanks," Norton said, and went out.

He didn't feel like stopping when the turnoff for Harrisburg came by. It made him a little queasy to be driving without a spare, but somehow he wasn't as worried about it as he'd been before. The trunk had had tire chains when he needed them. There was no telling what else might turn up back there at the right time. He then drove on.

Since the little man's own vehicle wasn't available to him, he had to arrange a rental. That was no problem, though. There were agencies in every city that specialized in such things. Very shortly he was in touch with one, not exactly by telephone, and was explaining his dilemma. "The difficulty," the little man said, "is that he's got a head start of several days. I've traced him to a point west of Chicago, and he's moving forward at a pretty steady 450 miles a day."

"You'd better fly, then."

"That's what I've been thinking too," said the little man. "What's available fast?"

"Could have given you a nice Persian job, but it's out having its tassels restrung. But you don't

care much for carpets anyway, do you? I forgot."

"Don't trust 'em in thermals," said the little man. "I caught an updraft once in Sikkim and I was halfway up the Himalayas before I got things under control. Looked for a while like I'd end up in orbit. What's at the stable?"

"Well, some pretty decent jobs. There's this classy stallion that's been resting up all winter, though actually he's a little cranky — maybe you'd prefer the bay gelding. Why don't you stop around and decide for yourself?"

"Will do," the little man said. "You still take Diner's Club, don't you?"

"All major credit cards, as always. You bet."

Norton was in southern Illinois an hour out of St. Louis on a foggy, humid morning, when the front right-hand tire blew. He had been expecting it to go for a day and a half, now, ever since he'd stopped in Altoona for gas. The kid at the service station had tapped the tire's treads and showed him the weak spot, and Norton had nodded and asked about his chances of buying a spare, and the kid had shrugged and said, "It's a funny size. Try in Pittsburgh, maybe you can find some."

He tried in Pittsburgh, killing an hour and a half there, and hearing from several men who probably

ought to know that tires just weren't made to that size, nohow. Norton was beginning to wonder how the previous owner of the car had managed to find replacements. Maybe this was still the original set, he figured. But he was morbidly sure of one thing: that weak spot was going to give out, beyond any doubt, before he saw L.A.

When it blew, he was doing about 35, and he realized at once what had happened. He slowed the car to a halt without losing control. The shoulder was wide here, but even so Norton was grateful that the flat was on the right-hand side of the car; he didn't much feature having to change a tire with his rump to the traffic. He was still congratulating himself on that small bit of good luck when he remembered that he had no spare tire.

Somehow he couldn't get very disturbed about it. Spending a dozen hours a day behind the wheel was evidently having a tranquilizing effect on him; at this point nothing worried him much, not even the prospect of being stranded an hour east of St. Louis.

He would merely walk to the nearest telephone, wherever that might happen to be, and he would phone the local automobile club and explain his predicament, and they would come out and get him and tow him to civilization. Then he would settle in a motel for a day

or two, phoning Ellen at her sister's place in L.A. to say that he was all right but was going to be a little late. Either he would have the tire patched or the automobile club would find a place in St. Louis that sold odd sizes, and everything would turn out for the best. Why get into a dither?

He stepped out of the car and inspected the flat, which looked very flat indeed. Then, observing that the trunk had popped open again, he went around back. Reaching in experimentally, he expected to find the tire chains at the outer edge of the trunk, where he had left them. They weren't there. Instead his fingers closed on a massive metal bar.

Norton tugged it part way out of the trunk and discovered that he had found a jack. Exactly so, he thought. And the spare tire ought to be right in back of it, over here, yes? He looked, but the lid was up only eighteen inches or so, and he couldn't see much. His fingers encountered good rubber, though. Yes, here it is. Nice and plump, brand new, deep treads — very pretty. And next to it, if my luck holds, I ought to find a chest of golden doubloons —

The doubloons weren't there. Maybe next time, he told himself. He hauled out the tire and spent a sweaty half hour putting it on. When he was done, he dumped the

jack, the wrench, and the blown tire into the trunk which immediately shut to the usual hermetic degree of sealing.

An hour later, without further incident, he crossed the Mississippi into St. Louis, found a room in a shiny new motel over-looking the Gateway Arch, treated himself to a hot shower and a couple of cold Gibsons, and put in a collect call to Ellen's sister. Ellen had just come back from some unsuccessful apartment-hunting, and she sounded tired and discouraged. Children were howling in the background as she said, "You're driving carefully, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

"And the new car is behaving okay?"

"Its behavior," Norton said, "is beyond reproach."

"My sister wants to know what kind it is. She says a Volvo is a good kind of car, if you want a foreign car. That's a Norwegian car."

"Swedish," he corrected.

He heard Ellen say to her sister, "He bought a Swedish car." The reply was unintelligible, but a moment later Ellen said, "She says you did a smart thing. Those Swedes, they make good cars too."

The flight ceiling was low, with visibility less than half a mile in thick fog. Airports were socked in all over Pennsylvania and eastern

Ohio. The little man flew westward, though, keeping just above the fleecy whiteness spreading to the horizon. He was making good time, and it was a relief not to have to worry about those damned private planes.

The bay gelding had plenty of stamina. He was a fuel-guzzler, that was his only trouble. You didn't get a whole lot of miles to the bale with the horses available nowadays, the little man thought sadly. Everything was in a state of decline, and you had to accept the situation.

His original flight plan had called for him to overtake his car somewhere in the Texas Panhandle. But he had stopped off in Chicago on a sudden whim to visit friends, and now he calculated he wouldn't catch up with the car until Arizona. He couldn't wait to get behind the wheel again, after all these months.

III

The more he thought about the trunk and the tricks it had played, the more bothered by it all Sam Norton was. The chains, the spare tire, the jack — what next? In Amarillo he had offered a mechanic twenty bucks to get the trunk open. The mechanic had run his fingers along that smooth seam in disbelief.

"What are you, one of those television fellers?" he asked. "Hav-

ing some fun with me?"

"Not at all," Norton said. "I just want that trunk opened up."

"Well, I reckon maybe with an acetylene torch —"

But Norton felt an obscure terror at the idea of cutting into the car that way. He didn't know why the thought frightened him so much, but it did, and he drove out of Amarillo with the car whole and the mechanic muttering and spraying his boots with tobacco juice. A hundred miles on, when he was over the New Mexico border and moving through bleak, forlorn, winter-browened country, he decided to put the trunk to a test.

LAST GAS BEFORE ROSWELL, a peeling sign warned. FILL UP NOW!

The gas gauge told him that the tank was nearly empty. Roswell was somewhere far ahead. There wasn't another human being in sight, no town, not even a shack. This, Norton decided, is the right place to run out of gas.

He shot past the gas station at fifty miles an hour.

In a few minutes he was two and a half mountains away from the filling station and beginning to have doubts not merely of the wisdom of his course but even of his sanity. Deliberately letting himself run out of gas was against all reason; it was harder even to do than deliberately letting the telephone go unanswered. A dozen times he ordered

himself to swing around and go back to fill his tank; and a dozen times refused.

The needle crept lower, until it was reading E for Empty, and still he drove ahead. The needle slipped through the red warning zone below the E. He had used up even the extra couple of gallons of gas that the tank didn't register — the safety margin for careless drivers. And any moment now the car would —
— stop.

For the first time in his life Sam Norton had run out of gas. Okay, trunk, let's see what you can do, he thought. He pushed the door open and felt the chilly zip of the mountain breeze. It was quiet here, ominously so; except for the gray ribbon of the road itself, this neighborhood had a darkly prehistoric look, all sagebrush and pinyon pine and not a trace of man's impact. Norton walked around to the rear of his car.

The trunk was open again.

It figures. Now I reach inside and find that a ten-gallon can of gas has mysteriously materialized, and —

He couldn't feel any can of gas in the trunk. He groped a good long while and came up with nothing more useful than a coil of thick rope.

Rope?

What good is a rope to a man who's out of gas in the desert?

Norton hefted the rope, seeking answers from it and not getting any. It occurred to him that perhaps this time the trunk hadn't *wanted* to help him. The skid, the blowout — those hadn't been his fault. But he had with malice aforethought let the car run out of gas, just to see what would happen, and maybe that didn't fall within the scope of the trunk's services.

Why the rope, though?

Some kind of grisly joke? Was the trunk telling him to go string himself up? He couldn't even do that properly here; there wasn't a telephone pole. Norton felt like kicking himself. Here he was, and here he'd remain for hours, maybe even for days, until another car came along. Of all the dumb stunts!

Angrily he hurled the rope out of the trunk. It uncoiled as he let go of it, and one end rose straight up. The bottom of the rope hovered about a yard off the ground, rigid, pointing skyward. A faint turquoise cloud formed at the upper end, and a thin, muscular olive-skinned boy in a turban and a loincloth climbed down to confront the gaping Norton.

"Well, what's the trouble?" the boy asked brusquely.

"I'm — out — of — gas."

"There's a filling station twenty miles back. Why didn't you tank up there?"

"I — that is —"

"What a damned fool," the boy said in disgust. "Why do I get stuck with jobs like this? All right, don't go anywhere and I'll see what I can do."

He went up the rope again and vanished.

When he returned, some three minutes later, he was carrying a tin of gasoline. Glowering at Norton, he slid the gas-tank cover aside and poured in the gas.

"This'll get you to Roswell," he said. "From now on look at your dashboard once in a while. Idiot!"

He scrambled up the rope. When he disappeared, the rope went limp and fell. Norton shakily picked it up and slipped it into the trunk, whose lid shut with an aggressive slam.

Half an hour went by before Norton felt it was safe to get behind the wheel again. He paced around the car something more than a thousand times, not getting a whole lot steadier in the nerves, and ultimately, with night coming on, got in and switched on the ignition. The engine coughed and turned over. He began to drive toward Roswell at a sober and steadfast fifteen miles an hour.

He was willing to believe anything, now.

And so it did not upset him at all when a handsome reddish-brown horse with the wingspread of a DC-3 came soaring through the air, circled above the car a couple of

times, and made a neat landing on the highway alongside him. The horse trotted along, keeping pace with him, while the small white-haired man in the saddle yelled, "Open your window wider, young fellow! I've got to talk to you!"

Norton opened the window.

The little man said, "Your name Sam Norton?"

"That's right."

"Well, listen, Sam Norton, you're driving my car!"

Norton saw a dirt turnoff up ahead and pulled into it. As he got out the pegasus came trotting up and halted to let its rider dismount. It cropped moodily at sagebrush, fluttering its huge wings a couple of times before folding them neatly along its back.

The little man said, "My car, all right. Had her specially made a few years back, when I was on the road a lot. Dropped her off at a garage last winter account of I had a business triip to make abroad, but I never figured they'd sell her out from under me before I got back. It's a decadent age."

"Your — car —" Norton said.

"My car, yep. Afraid I'll have to take it from you, too. Car like this, you don't want to own it, anyway. Too complicated. Get yourself a decent little standard make flivver, eh? Well, now, let's unhitch this trailer thing of yours, and then —"

"Wait a second," Norton said. "I bought this car legally. I've got a bill of sale to prove it, and a letter from the dealer's lawyer, explaining that —"

"— Don't matter one bit," said the little man. "One crook hires another crook to testify to his character, that's not too impressive. I know you're an innocent party, son, but the fact remains that the car is my property, and I hope I don't have to use special persuasion to get you to relinquish it."

"You just want me to get out and walk, is that it? In the middle of the New Mexico desert at sundown? Dragging the damned U-Haul with my bare hands?"

"Hadn't really considered that problem much," the little man said. "Wouldn't altogether be fair to you, would it?"

"It sure wouldn't."

"And what about the two hundred bucks I paid for the car?"

The little man laughed. "Shucks, it cost me more than that to rent the pegasus to come chasing you! And the overhead! You know how much hay that critter —"

"That's your problem," Norton said. "Mine is that you want to strand me in the desert and that you want to take away a car that I bought in good faith for two hundred dollars, and even if it's a god-dam magic car I —"

He paused helplessly.

"Hush, now," said the little man. "You're gettin' all upset, Sam! We can work this thing out. You're going to L.A., that it?"

"Ye-es."

"So am I. Okay, we travel together. I'll deliver you and your trailer there, and then the car's mine again, and you forget anything you might have seen these last few days."

"And my two hundred dol —"

"Oh, all right." The little man walked to the back of the car. The trunk opened; he slipped in a hand and pulled forth a sheaf of crisp new bills, a dozen twenties, which he handed to Norton. "Here. With a little something extra, thrown in. And don't look at them so suspiciously, hear? That's good legal tender U.S. money. They even got different serial numbers, every one." He winked and strolled over to the grazing pegasus, which he slapped briskly on the rump. "Git along, now. Head for home."

The horse began to canter along the highway. As it broke into a gallop it spread its superb wings; they beat furiously a moment, and the horse took off, rising in a superb arc until it was no bigger than a hawk against the darkening sky, and then was gone.

The little man slipped into the driver's seat of the car and fondled the wheel in obvious affection. At a nod, Norton took the seat beside him, and off they went.

"I understand you peddle computers," the little man said when he had driven a couple of miles. "Mighty interesting things, computers. I've been considering computerizing our operation too, you know? It's a pretty big outfit, a lot of consulting stuff all over the world, mostly dowsing now, some thaumaturgy, now and then a little transmutation, things like that, and though we use traditional methods, we don't object to the scientific approach. Now, let me tell you a bit about our inventory flow, and maybe you can make a few intelligent suggestions, young fellow, and you might just be landing a nice contract for yourself —"

Norton had the roughs for the system worked out before they hit Arizona. From Phoenix he phoned Ellen and found out that she had rented an apartment just outside Beverly Hills, in what *looked* like a terribly expensive neighborhood but really wasn't — at least, not by comparison with some of the other things she'd seen, and —

"It's okay," he said. "I'm in the process of closing a pretty big sale. I — ah — picked up a hitchhiker, and turns out he's thinking of going computer soon, a fairly large company —"

"Sam, you haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Not a drop."

"A hitchhiker and you sold him

a computer. Next you'll tell me about the flying saucer you saw."

"Don't be silly," Norton said. "Flying saucers aren't real."

They drove into L.A. in mid-morning, two days later. By then he had written the whole order, and everything was set; the commission, he figured, would be enough to see him through a new car, maybe one of those Swedish jobs Ellen's sister had heard about. The little man seemed to have no difficulty finding the address of the apartment Ellen had taken; he negotiated the maze of the freeways with complete ease and assurance, and pulled up outside the house.

"Been a most pleasant trip, young fellow," the little man said. "I'll be talking to my bankers later today about that wonderful machine of yours. Meanwhile here we part. You'll have to unhitch the trailer, now."

"What am I supposed to tell my wife about the car I drove here in?"

"Oh, just say that you sold it to that hitchhiker at a good profit. I think she'll appreciate that."

They got out. While Norton unloaded the U-Haul's couplings, the little man took something from the trunk, which had opened a moment before. It was a large rubbery tarpaulin. The little man began to spread it over the car. "Give us a hand here, will you?" he said.

"Spread it nice and neat, so it covers the fenders and everything." He got inside, while Norton, baffled, carefully tucked the tarpaulin into place.

"You want me to cover the windshield too?" he asked.

"Everything," said the little man.

There was a hissing sound, as of air being let out of tires. The tarpaulin began to flatten. At it sank toward the ground, there came a cheery voice from underneath, calling, "Good luck, young fellow!"

In moments the tarpaulin was less than three feet high. In a minute more it lay flat against the pavement. There was no sign of the car. It might have evaporated, or vanished into the earth. Slowly, uncomprehendingly, Norton picked up the tarpaulin, folded it until he could fit it under his arm, and walked into the house to tell his wife that he had arrived in Los Angeles.

Sam Norton never met the little man again, but he made the sale, and the commission saw him through a new car with something left over.

He still has the tarpaulin, too. He keeps it folded up and tied and wrapped and retied and carefully locked away in his basement. He's afraid to get rid of it, but he doesn't like to think of what might happen if someone comes across it and spreads it out.

END

WHAT THE VINTNERS BUY

by MACK REYNOLDS

He sought the ultimate pleasure.

With the devil's help, he got it!

"I had a little speech worked out. I was going to say, *I seek the ultimate pleasure*. But this can't be the place."

"But it is, Matt Williams."

"How did you know my name?"

The other closed the door, gestured to the room's one comfortable, albeit somewhat shabby chair.

"Are you truly surprised?"

Matt Williams took the seat.

"No, I guess not, given the circumstances. However, you don't look like the devil."

The other brought up the straight back chair that had stood before the small writing desk. "The words of my last client. It is a balderdash term, Matt Williams. In my time, I have sometimes tried to explain. You will forgive me if I do not go into the etymology still once again?"

Matt Williams' eyes went about the room in calculation, finally came back to his host.

"If you were what you claim you are, you'd be over in the Waldorf, not in this pad."

"With a tower suite, a magnum of *Champagne de Cru*, Blanc de Blanc of Cramant, say, 1937, and with that so charming Italian of the cinema . . . what is her name? The one with the formidable mammary glands." The voice was distantly mocking.

Matt Williams was impatient. "'37 was a great vintage in its time, but champagne is a white, and a blend besides. It should be drunk fairly young, say within fifteen years after the harvest. I don't get your point." He added, "What do I call you? Not Old Nick, I suppose."

"I have had many names. Call me Azazel, if you wish, an appellation I carried some time ago when I was more romantically inclined. The point I was trying to make, Matt Williams, is that such worldly desirables as penthouse suites, status symbol wines and even pulchritudinous young ladies have, over the centuries, lost much of their savor."

"I know what you mean." Matt Williams came to his feet and made his way to the grimy window. He looked out.

"You know why I am here?"

"You must tell me yourself, Matt Williams. Mine is the, ah, softest sell of all time."

The other turned back from the window. "That champagne bit. I don't think I've bothered with champagne for the past ten years. If I want to get smashed. I take gin. Among other things, it's quicker."

Azazel nodded. "Isn't it, though?"

Williams indicated contempt, though not directed at his host. "Women. You know how many women I had at once, the last time I bothered?"

"From past experience, more than three and matters get somewhat crowded."

Williams hadn't heard him. He returned to his chair. "I'll sum it up for you, Azazel, or whatever you said your name was."

The other's face expressed polite interest.

"Pleasure. I live for pleasure. A hedonist, eh? Perhaps in the Oscar Wilde school. No, no, I don't mean anything abnormal. Tried that, too, but no. I mean, well, simply, I live for pleasure."

The other nodded encouragingly. "What else?"

Williams looked at him, but then went on. "I've figured it out. There is no yesterday, there is no tomorrow. There is now. And you find your pleasure now, or you never find it. There is no other time."

"How well you put it."

"I was a kid during the Second War, straight out of the ninety-day-wonder schools, and among other duties, in charge of the ship's hospital, since it wasn't large enough to carry even a pharmacist's mate. It was wartime, nobody knew, nor cared, what was included in the medicine chest. When I was approached in Manila by a Philippino, I hadn't even known myself that we carried a few dozen syrettes of M and about fifty quarter grain tablets. He gave me three hundred for them."

"Everybody had his little angle," Azazel said in understanding. "If you didn't do it, somebody else would. Blackmarket cigarettes, shampoo or perfume from the PX to sell or trade to the girls, wrist-watches."

"Well, anyway, that was the first. Kind of intrigued me. I tried a syrette, just to see what it did that-anybody'd pay that kind of money for." Williams grunted. "Made me sleepy. Opium in general never showed me much. I tried a pipe a few times over in the Chinese section in Quiapo. But you have to be on it for years to get the full benefit. Now, horse is another thing. Got on it for awhile, after the war, but it's hard to shake if you get hooked."

"A bit expensive, too,"

"That wasn't the problem. I learned my lesson, there with the guy who gave me three bills for the M. There's nothing people will pay more for than quick kicks."

"How true."

Williams wagged a forefinger at his host. "I'll give you an example from experience. There is no law in Mexico against LSD. You can go to any drug store, *farmacias* they call them, and order fifty bucks worth of LSD. They have to send to England for it, but England has no rules against exporting LSD to a legitimate drug house in Mexico. So in a couple of weeks you pick up your acid and take it back home. It doesn't need much space, you drive across the border with it in your pants pocket, along with a few thousand other tourist cars. Back in San Francisco, or wherever, you cut it down and put a small amount on a lump of sugar, 1/200,000th of

an ounce to be exact, about 350 millograms. You want to know what one of those sugar cubes retails for?"

"I'd be fascinated."

"From two to five bucks. Sometimes as high as ten. You know how much worth of LSD is involved?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Perhaps a quarter of a cent's worth."

"I've always been an admirer of free enterprise," Azazel said. "I am to understand, then, that you deal in . . ."

"I pleasure beyond mere pleasure. I am a connoisseur par excellence."

"I see. And you, yourself, besides dispensing this most recent escape from reality, are familiar with its gifts?"

"I have tried everything . . . twice," Williams said flatly. "Among the hallucinogens, cannabis and mescaline, psilocybin derived from the divine mushrooms of the pre-Columbians, yopo snuff from the Orinoco basin, and the brew the Peruvians call yajé. Did you know that the Mexican Indians alone are acquainted with thirteen phantastica?"

"Amazing."

"And I have known them all."

"And . . ."

"And have wearied of them all."

For a long moment, they both held silence.

"Which brings us to the point," Williams added finally.

"Yes."

"I seek the ultimate pleasure. You might say, I have a horror of dying without achieving it. For the past decade and more it has worked on me. Frankly, *nothing* makes any difference any longer, save attaining the most ultimate pleasure comprehensible by man."

"Of course."

"You can deliver it?"

"Yes. In return for that which I seek."

Williams grunted. "I have never been interested in theology."

"Many find it quite boring."

"So far as religion is concerned, I'm not even an atheist."

"How cleverly put."

Matt Williams leaned forward, hands on knees. "However, I am also not stupid, and not here to be diddled. How do I know you can deliver?"

"The question is well taken, but somewhat difficult to answer. You see Matt Williams, we live in different frames of reference. Briefly, I have resources beyond your comprehension."

"I'm listening."

"Suffice to say that long millennia ago there was a conflict between factions, and . . ."

"A war of angels," Williams said cynically.

"If you will. I submit that your information of the matter is based

upon the reports of our antagonists who, admittedly, were for the greater part the victors. Have you ever wondered, Matt Williams, how different your opinions might be had Washington lost and the troops of George the Third prevailed? Have you ever wondered what Hannibal's Carthaginians were like and in what they believed? All the present accounts are of Roman derivation, and largely we have such pictures as parents throwing their first born into the furnace maw of Baal. Have you ever wondered what the Aztec story might be, told by themselves, rather than by the victorious Conquistadores?"

"To sum up your point?"

"I merely indicate that perhaps the war of angels might not have been quite what has come down to you. Tell me, Matt Williams, in what language were the Ten Commandments written when Moses brought them down from the mountain top?"

"How would I know? Hebrew?"

"Written Hebrew was not only unknown at the time, but as yet the alphabet had not been devised by the Phoenecians. Hieroglyphics, utilized by the Egyptians, were familiar only to the priesthood. I was bringing home to you the fact that such knowledge as you possess about the so-called war of angels was handed down by word of mouth for long millenia before man got around to written records. Can you

realize that even the terminology you use is largely nonsense? That you have no capacity to understand the issues involved, the motivations . . . and needs?"

Matt Williams capitulated. "All right. I'll accept that you have resources beyond my comprehension. But I want to make it clear I am not interested in some hobbly-dygook, or having palmed off on me something like true love, whatever that is, or sacrifice for others, or fame, or . . ."

"Obviously, Matt Williams," Azazel nodded in understanding. "You have emptied to the dregs the goblet of ordinary pleasures. Now you seek the ultimate, and for it, connoisseur that you are, you are willing to give all."

"But for nothing short of the ultimate," Williams insisted.

"You realize, of course, your immortal psyche is involved."

Williams grunted.

"I am not impowered to make our . . . our deal, unless that is clear to you."

"I told you my philosophy. There is no yesterday, there is no tomorrow. I ask that I be allowed to enjoy this ultimate pleasure, then live out my normal life span, whatever it would have been, had I never come here. What happens then, I couldn't care less."

"Contrary to popular superstition, Matt Williams, we do not cheat. We

could not, even if we so desired."

There was the slightest of twitches at the side of the mouth, of hesitation in the eyes, but Williams said, "So far as I am concerned, the deal is made — *if* you deliver."

"So that all is clear, Matt Williams, our pact is that we exchange the ultimate pleasure for what is known as your psyche."

"Right."

"Very well."

Azazel extended his hand. Cupped it it was a . . . a something.

Matt Williams squinted. He frowned in unhappy perplexity. The object, if it could be called an object, was not exactly visible. It shimmered, but had no exact size or shape. It had a mother-of-pearl quality, a simplicity of beauty.

"What is it?"

"The ultimate pleasure."

"But . . . well, what do I do with it? Take it like a pill, or what?" He was scowling.

"You may take it that way, if you wish. It is now yours, to take when and as you will. The deal is consummated, Matt Williams."

"But what is it?"

"It is one moment of the Ultimate Pleasure."

"One moment?"

"Duration had no part of our agreement, Matt Williams. Besides, it is all I can possibly give."

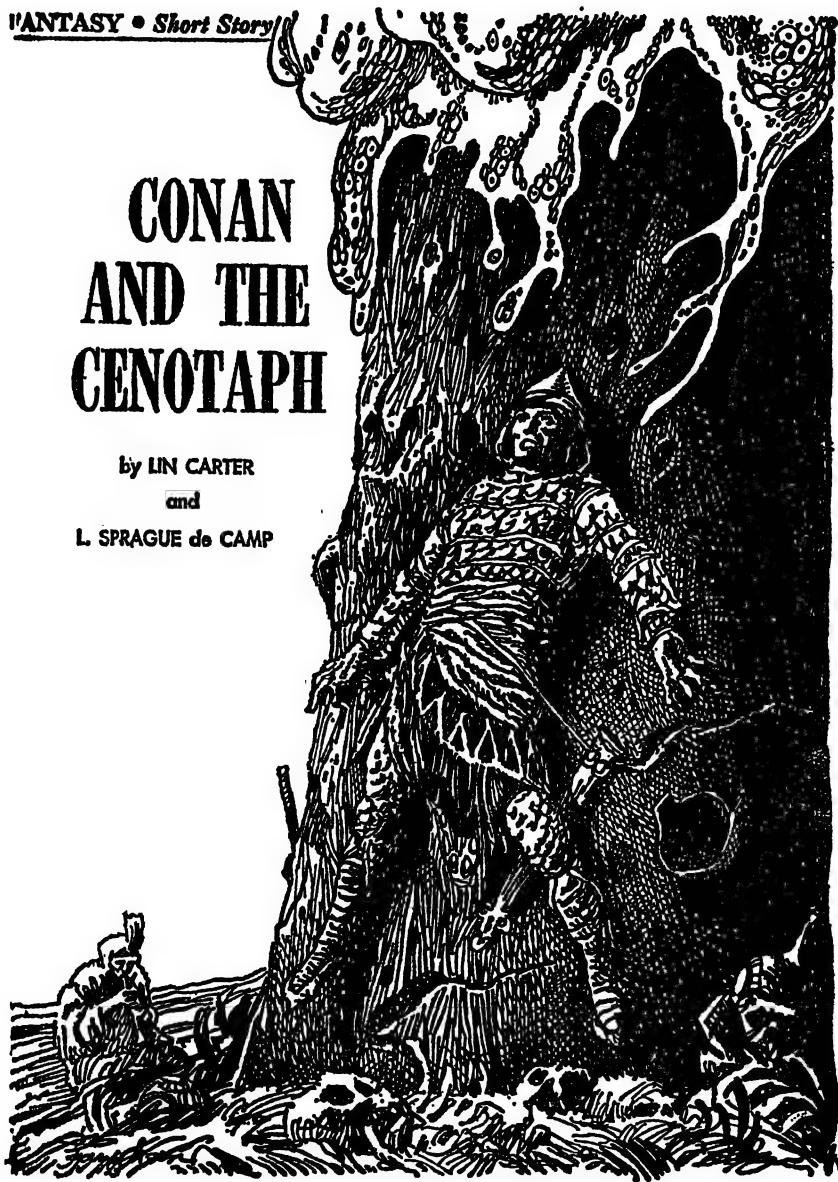
"One moment of *what*?"

"Paradise."

END

CONAN AND THE CENOTAPH

by LIN CARTER
and
L. SPRAGUE de CAMP



Conan was young, still untempered
in the dark deceits of the East.

"Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world . . ."

— *The Nemedian Chronicles*

The sheer cliffs of dark stone closed about Conan the Cimmerian like the sides of a trap. He did not like the way their jagged peaks loomed against the few faint stars, which glittered like the eyes of spiders down upon the small camp on the flat floor of the valley. Neither did he like the chill, uneasy wind that whistled across the stony heights and prowled about the campfire. It caused the flames to lean and flicker, sending monstrous black shadows writhing across the rough stone walls.

The soldiers sat about the fire, sharing the last of this night's ration of wine from goatskin bags. Some laughed and boasted of the amorous feats they would do in the silken bagnios of Aghrapur upon their return. Others, weary from a long day's hard ride, sat silently,

staring at the fire and yawning.

Standing with his back to the nearest of the giant redwoods, Conan wrapped his cloak more closely about him against the dank breeze from the heights. Although his troopers were well-built men of good size, he towered half a head over the tallest of them, while the enormous breadth of shoulder made them seem puny by comparison. His square-cut black mane escaped from below the edges of his spired, turban-wound helmet, and the deep-set blue eyes in his dark, scarred face caught glints of red from the firelight.

Sunk in one of his fits of melancholy gloom, Conan silently cursed King Yildiz, the well-meaning but weak Turanian monarch who had sent him on this ill-omened mission. Over a year had passed since he had taken the oath of allegiance to the king of Turan. Six months before, he had been lucky enough to earn this king's favor; with the help of a fellow-mercenary, Juma the Kushite, he had rescued Yildiz's daughter Zosara from the mad god-king of Meru. He had

brought the princess, more or less intact, to her affianced bridegroom, Khan Kujula of the nomadic Kuigar horde.

When Conan returned to Yildiz's glittering capital of Aghrapur, he had found the monarch generous enough in his gratitude. Both he and Juma had been raised to captain. But, whereas Juma had obtained a coveted post in the Royal Guard, Conan had been rewarded with yet another arduous, perilous mission. Now, as he recalled these events, he sourly contemplated the fruits of success.

Yildiz had entrusted the Cimmerian giant with a letter to King Shu of Kusan, a minor kingdom in western Khitai. At the head of forty veterans, Conan had accomplished the immense journey. He had traversed hundreds of leagues of bleak Hyrkanian steppe and skirted the foothills of the towering Talakma Mountains. He had threaded his way through the windy deserts and swampy jungles bordering the mysterious realm of Khitai, the easternmost land of which the men of the West had heard.

Arrived in Kusan at last, Conan had found the venerable and philosophical King Shu a splendid host. While Conan and his warriors were plied with exotic food and drink and furnished with willing concubines, the king and his advisers decided to accept King Yildiz's offer of a treaty of friendship and trade. So the

wise old king had handed Conan a gorgeous scroll of gilded silk. Thereon were inscribed, in the writhing ideographs of Khitai and the gracefully slanted characters of Hyrkania, the formal replies and felicitations of the Khitan king.

Besides a silken purse full of Khitan gold, King Shu had also furnished Conan with a high noble of his court, to guide them as far as the western borders of Khitai. But Conan had not liked this guide, this Duke Feng.

The Khitan was a slim, dainty, foppish little man with a soft, lisping voice. He wore fantastical silken garments, unsuited to rugged riding and camping, and drenched his exquisite person in heavy perfume. He never soiled his soft, long-nailed hands with any of the camp chores, but instead kept his two servants busy day and night ministering to his comfort and dignity.

Conan looked down upon the Khitan's habits with a hard-bitten barbarian's manly contempt. The duke's slanting black eyes and purring voice reminded him of a cat, and he often told himself to watch this little princeling for treachery. On the other hand, he secretly envied the Khitan his exquisitely cultivated manners and easy charm. This fact led Conan to resent the duke even more; for, although his Turanian service had given Conan some slight polish, he was still at heart the blunt, boorish young bar-

barian. He would have to be careful of this sly little Duke Feng.

"Do I disturb the profound meditations of the nobly-born commander?" purred a soft voice.

Conan started and snatched at the hilt of his tulwar before he recognized the person of Duke Feng, wrapped to the lip in a voluminous cloak of pea-green velvet. Conan started to growl a contemptuous curse. Then, remembering his ambassadorial duties, he turned the oath into a formal welcome that sounded unconvincing even in his own ears.

"Perhaps the princely captain is unable to sleep?" murmured Feng, appearing not to notice Conan's ungraciousness. Feng spoke fluent Hyrkanian. This was one reason for his having been dispatched to guide Conan's troop, for Conan's command of the singsong Khitan tongue was little more than a smattering. Feng continued:

"This person is so fortunate as to possess a sovereign remedy for sleeplessness. A gifted apothecary concocted it for me from an ancient recipe: a decoction of lily buds ground into cinnamon and spiced with poppy seeds . . ."

"No, nothing," growled Conan. "I thank you, Duke, but it's something about this accursed place. Some uncanny premonition keeps me wakeful when, after a long day's

ride, I should be as weary as a stripling after his first night's bout of love."

The duke's features twitched a trifle, as if he winced at Conan's crudity — or was it merely a flicker of the firelight? In any case, he suavely replied:

"I think I understand the misgivings of the excellent commander. Nor are such disquieting emotions unusual in this — ah — this legend-fraught valley. Many men have perished here."

"A battlefield, eh?" grunted Conan.

The duke's narrow shoulders twitched beneath the green cloak. "Nay, nothing like that, my heroic Western friend. This spot lies near the tomb of an ancient king of my people: King Hsia of Kusan. He caused his entire royal guard to be beheaded and their heads buried with him, that their spirits should continue to serve him in the next world. The common superstition, however, avers that the ghosts of these guardsmen march in review, up and down this valley." The soft voice dropped even lower. "Legend also states that a magnificent treasure of gold and precious jewels was buried with him; and this tale I believe to be true."

Conan pricked up his ears. "Gold and gems, eh? Has it ever been found, this treasure?"

Conan had early learned the civilized love of riches.

The Khitan surveyed Conan for a moment with an oblique, contemplative gaze. Then, as if having reached some private decision, he replied:

"No, Lord Conan; for the precise location of the trove is not known — save to one man."

Conan's interest was quite visible now. "To whom?" he demanded bluntly.

The Khitan smiled. "To my unworthy self, of course."

"Crom and Erlik! If you've known where this loot was hidden, why haven't you dug it up ere now?"

"My people are haunted by superstitious fears of a curse laid upon the site of the old king's tomb, which is marked by a monolith of dark stone. Hence I have never been able to persuade anyone to assist me in seizing the treasure, whose hiding place I alone know."

"Why couldn't you do it all by yourself?"

Feng spread his small, long-nailed hands. "I needed a trustworthy assistant to guard my back against any stealthy foe, human or animal, that might approach whilst I was rapt in contemplation of the booty. Moreover, a certain amount of digging and lifting and prying will be required. A gentleman like me lacks the thews for such crude, physical efforts.

"Now harken, gallant sir! This person led the honorable comman-

der through this valley, not by happenstance but by design. When I heard that the Son of Heaven wished me to accompany the brave captain westward, I seized upon the proposal with alacrity. This commission came as a veritable gift from the divine officials in Heaven, for Your Lordship possesses the musculature of the three ordinary men. And, being a Western-born foreigner, you naturally do not share the superstitious terrors of us of Kusan. Am I correct in my assumption?"

Conan grunted. "I fear neither god, man, nor devil, and least of all the ghost of a long-dead king. Speak on, Lord Feng."

The duke sidled closer, his voice dropping to a scarcely audible whisper. "Then, here is my plan. As I have stated, this person guided you hither because I thought you might be he whom I have sought. The task will be light for one of your strength, and my baggage includes tools for excavation. Let us go upon the instant, and within an hour we shall be richer than either of us has dreamed!"

Feng's seductive, purring whisper awoke the lust for loot in Conan's barbaric heart, but a residue of caution restrained the Cimmerian from immediate assent.

"Why not rouse a squad of my troopers to aid us?" he grumbled. "Or your servants? Surely we shall

need help in bringing the plunder back to camp!"

Feng shook his sleek head. "Not so, honorable ally! The treasure consists of two small golden caskets of virgin gold, each packed with exceedingly rare and precious gems. We can each carry the fortune of a principedom, and why share this treasure with others? Since the secret is mine alone, I am naturally entitled to half. Then, if you are so lavish as to divide your half amongst your forty warriors . . . Well, that is for you to decide."

It took no more urging to persuade Conan to Duke Feng's scheme. The pay of King Yildiz's soldiers was meager and usually in arrears. Conan's recompense for his arduous Turanian service to date had been many empty words of honor and precious little hard coin.

"I go to fetch the digging implements," murmured Feng. "We should leave the camp separately, so as not to arouse suspicion. Whilst I unpack the utensils, you shall don your coat of mail and your arms."

Conan frowned. "Why should I need armor, just to dig up a chest?"

"Oh, excellent sir! There are many dangers in these hills. Here roam the terrible tiger, the fierce leopard, the churlish bear, and the irascible wild bull, not to mention wandering bands of primitive hunters. Since a Khitan gentleman is not trained in the use of arms, your

mighty self must be prepared to fight for two. Believe me, noble captain, I know whereof I speak!"

"Oh, all right," grumbled Conan.

"Excellent! I knew that so superior a mind as yours would see the force of my arguments. And now we part, to meet again at the foot of the valley at moonrise. That should occur about one double hour hence, which will give us ample time for our rendezvous."

The night grew darker and the wind, colder. All the eery premonitions of danger, which Conan had experienced since first entering this forsaken vale at sundown, returned in full force. As he walked silently beside the diminutive Khitan, he cast wary glances into the darkness. The steep rock walls on either side narrowed until there was hardly room to walk between the cliffside and the banks of the stream, which gurgled out of the valley at their feet.

Behind them, a glow appeared in the misty sky where the heads of the cliffs thrust blackly up against the firmament. This glow grew stronger and became a pearly opalescence. The walls of the valley fell away on either hand, and the two men found themselves treading a grassy sward that spread out on both sides. The stream angled off to the right and, gurgling, curved out of sight between banks clustered with ferns.

As they issued from the valley, the half moon rose over the cliffs behind them. In the misty air, it looked as if the viewer were seeing it from under water. The wan illusive light of this moon shone upon a small, rounded hill, which rose out of the sward directly before them. Beyond it, steep-sided, forest-crested hills stood up blackly in the watery moonlight.

As the moon cast a powdering of silver over the hill before them, Conan forgot his premonitions. For here rose the monolith of which Feng had spoken. It was a smooth, dully glistening shaft of dark stone, which rose from the top of the hill and soared up until it pierced the layer of mist that overhung the land. The top of the shaft appeared as a mere blur.

Here, then, was the cenotaph of the long-dead King Hsia, just as Feng had foretold. The treasure must be buried either directly beneath it or to one side. They would soon find out which.

With Feng's crowbar and shovel on his shoulder, Conan pushed forcefully through a clump of tough, elastic rhododendron bushes and started up the hill. He paused to give his small companion a hand up. After a brief scramble, they gained the top of the slope.

Before them, the shaft rose from the center of the gently convex surface of the hilltop. The hill, thought Conan, was probably an artificial

mound, such as were sometimes piled up over the remains of great chiefs in his own country. If the treasure were at the bottom of such a pile, it would take more than one night's digging to uncover it . . .

With a startled oath, Conan clutched at his shovel and crowbar. Some invisible force had seized upon them and pulled them toward the shaft. He leaned away from the shaft, his powerful muscles bulging under his mail shirt. Inch by inch, however, the force dragged him toward the monolith. When he saw that he would be drawn against the shaft willy-nilly, he let go of the tools, which flew to the stone. They struck it with a loud double clank and stuck fast to it.

But releasing the tools did not free Conan from the attraction of the monument, which now pulled on his mail shirt as powerfully as it had on the shovel and the crowbar. Staggering and cursing, Conan was slammed against the monolith with crushing force. His back was pinned to the shaft, as were his upper arms where the short sleeves of the mail shirt covered them. So was his head inside the spired Turanian helmet, and so was the scabbarded sword at his waist.

Conan struggled to tear himself free but found that he could not. It was as if unseen chains bound him securely to the column.

"What devil's trick is this, you treacherous dog?" he ground out.

Smiling and imperturbable, Feng strolled up to where Conan stood pinned against the pillar. Seemingly impervious to the mysterious force, the Khitan took a silken scarf from one of the baggy sleeves of his silken coat. He waited until Conan opened his mouth to bellow for help, then adroitly jammed a bunch of the silk into Conan's mouth. While Conan gagged and chewed on the cloth, the little man knotted the scarf securely around Conan's head, gagging him. At last Conan stood, panting but silent, glaring venomously down into the courteous smile of the little duke.

"Forgive the ruse, O noble savage!" lisped Feng. "It was needful that this person concoct some tale to appeal to your primitive lust for gold to allure you hither."

Conan's eyes blazed with volcanic fury as he hurled all the might of his powerful body against the invisible bonds that held him against the monolith. It did no good; he was helpless. Sweat trickled down his brow and soaked the cotton haqueton beneath his mail. He tried to shout, but only grunts and gurgles came forth.

"Since, my dear captain, your life approaches its predestined end," continued Feng, "it would be impolite of me not to explain my actions, so that your lowly spirit

may journey to whatever hell the gods of the barbarians have prepared for it in full knowledge of the causes of your downfall. Know that the court of his amiable but foolish highness, the king of Kusan, is divided between two parties. One of these, that of the White Peacock, welcomes contact with the barbarians of the West. The other, that of the Golden Pheasant, abominates all association with those animals; and I, of course, am one of the selfless patriots of the Golden Pheasant. Willingly would I give my life to bring your so-called embassy to destruction, lest contact with your barbarous masters contaminate our pure culture and upset our divinely ordained social system.

"Happily, such an extreme measure seems unnecessary. For I have you, the leader of this band of foreign devils, and there around your neck hangs the treaty the Son of Heaven signed with your uncouth heathen king."

The little duke pulled out from under Conan's mail shirt the ivory tube containing the documents. He unclasped the chain that secured it around Conan's neck and tucked it into one of his voluminous sleeves, adding with a malicious smile:

"As for the force that holds you prisoner, I will not attempt to explain its subtle nature to your childish wits. Suffice it to explain that the substance whereof this monolith was hewn has the curious

property of attracting iron and steel with irresistible force. So tremble not; it is no unholy magic that holds you captive."

Conan was little heartened by this news. He had once seen a conjuror in Aghrapur pick up nails with a piece of dark-red stone and supposed that the force that held him was of the same sort. But any force that could bind him thus without chains was all equally magic as far as he was concerned.

"Lest you entertain false hopes of rescue by your men," Feng went on, "I have thought of that, also. In these hills dwell the Jagas, a primitive head-hunting tribe. Attracted by your campfire, they will assemble at the ends of the valley and rush your camp at dawn. It is their invariable procedure.

"By that time I shall, I hope, be far away. If they capture me, too — well, a man must die some time, and I trust I shall do so with the dignity and decorum befitting one of my rank and culture. My head would make a delightful ornament in a Jaga hut, I am sure.

"And so, my good barbarian, farewell. You will forgive this person for turning his back upon you during your last moments. For your demise is a pity in a way, and I should not enjoy witnessing it. Had you had the advantages of a Khitan upbringing, you would have made an admirable servant — say, a

bodyguard for me. But things are as they are."

After a mocking bow of farewell, the Khitan withdrew to the lower slope of the hill. Conan wondered if the Duke's plan was to leave him trapped against the shaft until he perished of starvation and thirst. If his men marked his absence before dawn, they might look for him. But then, since he had stolen out of the camp without leaving word of his going, they would not know whether to be alarmed by his absence. If he could only get word to them, they would scour the countryside for him and make short work of the treacherous little duke. But how to get word?

Again he threw his massive strength against the force that held him crushed against the column, but to no avail. He could move his lower legs and arms and even turn his head somewhat from side to side. But his body was firmly gripped by the iron mail that clothed it.

Now the moon brightened. Conan observed that, about his feet and elsewhere around the base of the monument, grisly remains of other victims were scattered. Human bones and teeth were heaped like old rubbish; he must have trodden upon them when the mysterious force pulled him up against the shaft.

In the stronger light, Conan was

disquieted to see that these remains were peculiarly discolored. A closer look showed that the bones seemed to have been eaten away here and there, as if some corrosive fluid had dissolved their smooth surfaces to expose the spongy structure beneath.

He turned his head from side to side, seeking some means of escape. The words of the smooth-tongued Khitan seemed to be true, for now he could discern pieces of iron held against the curiously stained and discolored stone of the column by the invisible force. To his left he sighted the shovel, the crowbar, and the rusty bowl of a helmet, while on the other side a time-eaten dagger was stuck against the stone. Yet once more he hurled his strength against this impalpable force . . .

From below sounded an eery piping sound — a mocking, maddening tune. Straining his eyes through the fickle moonlight Conan saw that Feng had not left the scene after all. Instead, the duke was sitting on the grass on the side of the hill, near its base. He had drawn a curious flute from his capacious garments and was playing upon it.

Through the shrill piping, a faint, squashy sound reached Conan's ears. It seemed to come from above. The muscles of Conan's bullneck stood out as he twisted his head to look upward; the spired Turanian helmet grated against the stone

as he moved. Then the blood froze in his veins.

The mist that had obscured the top of the pylon was gone. The rising half moon shone on and through an amorphous thing, which squatted obscenely on the summit of the column. It was like a huge lump of quivering, semi-translucent jelly — and it lived. Life — throbbing, bloated life — pulsed within it. The moonlight glistened wetly upon it as it beat like a huge, living heart.

As Conan, frozen with horror, watched, the dweller on the top of the monolith sent a trickle of jelly groping down the shaft toward him. The slippery pseudopod slithered over the smooth surface of the stone. Conan began to understand the source of the stains that discolored the face of the monolith.

The wind had changed, and a vagrant down-draft wafted a sickening stench to Conan's nostrils. Now he knew why the bones at the base of the shaft bore that oddly eaten appearance. With a dread that almost unmanned him, he understood that the jellylike thing exuded a digestive fluid, by means of which it consumed its prey. He wondered how many men, in ages past, had stood in his place, bound helplessly to the pillar and awaiting the searing caress of the abomination now descending toward him.

Perhaps Feng's weird piping

summoned it, or perhaps the odor of living flesh called it to feast. Whatever the cause, it had begun a slow, inching progress down the side of the shaft toward his face. The wet jelly sucked and slobbered as it slithered slowly toward him.

Despair gave new strength to his cramped, tired muscles. He threw himself from side to side, striving with every last ounce of strength to break the grip of the mysterious force. To his surprise, he found that, in one of his lunges, he slid to one side, partway around the column.

So the grip that held him did not forbid all movement! This gave him food for thought, though he knew that he could not long thus elude the monster of living jelly.

Something prodded his mailed side. Looking down, he saw the rust-eaten dagger he had glimpsed before. His movement sideways had brought the hilt of the weapon against his ribs.

His upper arm was still clamped against the stone by the sleeve of his mail shirt, but his forearm and hand were free. Could he bend his arm far enough to clasp the haft of the dagger?

He strained, inching his hand along the stone. The mail of his arm scraped slowly over the surface; sweat trickled into his eyes. Bit by bit, his straining arm moved toward the handle of the dagger. The taunting tune of Feng's flute

sang maddeningly in his ears, while the ungodly stench of the slime-thing filled his nostrils.

His hand touched the dagger, and in an instant he held the hilt fast. But, as he strained it away from the shaft, the rust-eaten blade broke with a sharp *ping*. Rolling his eyes downward, he saw that about two thirds of the blade, from the tapering point back, had broken off and lay flat against the stone. The remaining third still projected from the hilt. Since there was now less iron in the dagger for the shaft to attract, Conan was able, by a muscle-bulging effort, to tear the stump of the weapon away from the shaft.

A glance showed him that, although most of the blade was lost to him, the stump still had a couple of apparently sharp edges. With his muscles quivering from the effort of holding the implement away from the stone, he brought one of these edges up against the leathern thong that bound the two halves of the mail shirt together. Carefully, he began to saw the tough rawhide with the rusty blade.

Every movement was agony. The torment of suspense grew unbearable. His hand, bent into an uncomfortable, twisted position, ached and grew numb. The ancient blade was notched, thin, and brittle; a hasty motion might break it, leaving him helpless. Stroke after stroke he saw-

ed up and down, with exquisite caution. The stench of the creature grew stronger and the sucking sounds of its progress, louder.

Then Conan felt the thong snap. The next instant, he hurled his full strength against the magnetic force that imprisoned him. The thong unraveled through the loop-holes in the mail shirt, until one whole side of the shirt was open. His shoulder and half an arm came out through the opening.

Frantically, he pulled his arm out of the sleeve of the unlaced side of the mail shirt. With his free hand, he unbuckled his sword belt and the chin strap of his helmet. Then he tore himself loose altogether from the deadly constriction of the mail, leaving his tulwar and his armor flattened against the stone.

Glancing back, he saw that the jelly-beast had now angulfed his helmet. Baffled in its quest for flesh, it was sending more pseudopods down and outward, wavering and questing in the watery light.

Down the slope, the demoniac piping continued. Feng sat cross-legged on the grass of the slope, tweedling away on his flute as if absorbed in some unhuman ecstasy.

Conan ripped off and threw away the gag. He pounced like a striking leopard. He came down, clutching hands first, upon the little duke; the pair rolled down the rest of the

slope in a tangle of silken robe and thrashing limbs. A blow to the side of the head subdued Feng's struggles. Conan groped into the Khitan's wide sleeves and tore out the ivory cylinder containing the documents.

Then Conan lurched back up the hill, dragging Feng after him. As he reached the level section around the base of the monolith, he heaved Feng into the air over his head.

The Duke screamed — once!

Conan strode back to camp on stiff legs. Behind him, like a giant's torch, the monolith stood against the sky, wrapped in smoky, scarlet flames.

It had been the work of moments only to strike fire into dry tinder with his flint and steel. He had watched with grim satisfaction as the oily surface of the slime-monster ignited and blazed as it squirmed in voiceless agony. Let them both burn, he thought: the half-digested corpse of that treacherous dog and his loathsome pet!

"Ho, you gaping oafs!" he roared as he strode into the firelight. "Wake the boys and saddle up to run for it. The Jaga headhunters caught us, and they'll be here any time. They got the duke, but I broke free. Khusro! Mulai! Hop to it, if you do not want your heads hung up in their devil-devil huts! And I hope to Crom you've left me some of that wine!"

END

AFTER ARMAGEDDON

by PARIS FLAMMONDE

*This life, this space, this time
Suckles on that and there and then;
And each in spate and goal
Seeks for an all to reach a when.*

The last war began a few minutes after dawn. Spanish Tom, known by no other name although pure Seminole, was deep into the cypress swamp before the sky was light. The further he traveled into the wet jade jungle, the less frequent were the probings of the ascending sun. Tom sought, as he had sought before, the refuge of the dark, dank webs of wood and water. It did not occur to him that this time the land across the marshes and the saw grass, even the misty world beyond the slimy,

green-sworled slough water, offered no sanctuary.

Then the almost unseen sky above the wild-haired trees was molten, the incredible vegetative intricacies of the Everglades were bleached — not even white; they simply lost their total pigmentation. The animals faded like old color photographs; albino alligators, milky snakes, transparent birds appeared as if by alchemy. The water agitated into a tympany of seething steam.

Tom raced, devoid of reason,

beyond the natural labyrinths he knew, into the remote recesses of the forest he had only heard of. As the shell of his small, outboard boat began to smoke, the cataclysmic geyser broke up through the scummy surface of the swamp without warning. An explosive tower of silver, a torrential column of iridescent foam, imploding on itself as it careened up shadowy air, bursting through the massive thatch of greenwood overhead.

Everywhere else, the swamp pulsed in an accelerated boil. The small prow of the boat broke into flame. There was no other place to go, no option. Hurling his boat into the immaculate eruption, which instantly engulfed him and his craft, Spanish Tom discovered in his frenzied fear, the legendary fountain.

Four hundred and fifteen years later, the appearance of the last man on earth remained unchanged. His baptism in Ponce de Leon's dream had occurred when he was thirty-one, but not a hair had grayed, not one extra line was added to the taut, bronze face. However although his memory retained images and incidents for as long a time as it had centuries earlier, even before the ultimate Armageddon, the world as it existed prior to Nature's reassuring its domain was wholly gone. Without effort Tom remembered bringing

down the bull bison out on the plains beyond the enormous river, and that was surely twenty Springs ago, but nothing of cities, nothing of machines, still huddled in the corner of his ancient memory. All that had been civilization had long ago been polished from his mind; the endless liquifaction of the ages had erased his heritage. Everything was gone, except —

Tom, even yet, remembered that sometime, somewhere he had not been the last man on earth; he had not even been the only man on earth.

It wasn't the cliffs of twisted, blackened steel his traveling occasionally sent him scrambling through; he no longer knew that nature had not made them. It wasn't the fields of hard, gigantic birds he'd come upon in recent years, birds that never moved, that never made a sound. He merely thought that they were dead and petrified. No, it was no artifact; everything he saw was natural to him. It was an aspect of his being deep within, the element that kept Tom still a man.

One day as he sat fishing on the banks of the Okeechobee, the vague sensation suddenly leapt forward from the shadow alcove of uncertain sensing. There, in the middle ground of mind, he wondered if another man like him walked and fished, hunted and camped somewhere out beyond the

land to which he had confined himself for nearly four and a half centuries. The thought was accompanied by a doubt. If such a thing were really there, beyond the lake, beyond the swamps and marshes to the north — or anywhere where land and water went — would it be . . . He couldn't remember the word *good* and he settled for "soft and warm like his barking animal, or skin-opening like the muddy soft-warm animal that screamed at night?"

It did not matter, he soon realized. That day Tom began to search.

Spanish Tom spoke within himself a good deal when he was nine hundred and seventy-eight. He was fond of remarking that "wanting make walking," to explain why he still looked for the face that was not the face in the water. He did not know anything of necessity and invention, but he had finally found old books, decided that his kind had come before, discovered pictures of boats, and after almost fifty years of trial and error, succeeded in building an excellent vessel of nearly forty feet — large for a single man, but modified so he could sail it all alone. In it he traveled far across the world, visiting every continent — excepting Australia and Antarctica, which he did not discover — to find if there was anybody else.

It was the sighting of a cave, halfway up the snowy slope in Switzerland, that caused his accident. Of course, he had had accidents before, but none had ever seemed to do him too much damage. The vigor of his endless youth had served him well. Once, he had wondered whether he would live forever, whether he was immortal — the animals, the birds, even the alligators died, but he lived on and on. Still, he did not know if he would live until the sun went out. Or, more accurately, he had not considered the question for more than half a millennium.

However, as he clambered up the mountain face to see if there might be evidence of otherness in that high opening, the glacial footing slipped and Tom went bouncing down the icy shell, with tons of dangerous debris in cold pursuit. When the last man on earth finally came to rest, his right leg was badly sprained, but not broken, and a five-inch gash had laid his skull wide open. But Tom survived, either because he was immortal or because he was still young and filled with great recuperative powers; and two years later he was sailing seas and hunting hope in jungles once again.

A few months later he succumbed to what he called the Great Sleep.

Awaking he could not imagine how much time had passed. Wheth-

er earth had been green-brown, white-black, riots of color or stark when he lay down, he could not recall. Nor even where he was. However, within a month of browsing about, he remembered an area some hundred miles away. He was on the plains of India. After that his Great Sleep came again and again, and while time had not been a function of his world for almost a thousand years — not in the sense it had existed before the final war — he still had thought in terms of eight Summers, or five Falls. Now, the periods of the Great Sleep made such simple calculations pointless. He never knew how many periods of snow had come and gone while he must have lain hibernating in some violet cave, slumbering beneath a lazy-shifting palm. He only knew the sleeps were long, wor when he woke he could remember hardly a fragment of what had gone before.

Tom slowly turned melancholy. He had been disappointed in his nearly endless search for a companion, and now the Great Sleep shattered continuity and robbed a life, already without goal, of any a constant character within which some security could be assumed. Still, he kept wandering — with ever less purpose, always more aimlessly. And the Great Sleeps came and went, and came and went again.

. It alone marked time.

One day, however, Tom discovered ecstasy. Landing on the coast of Japan, he found a shelter built against a high, pink fluted cliff. A superficial glance told him that it was not the kind of hut he built. The whole approach was different. Yet close examination made it clear that it could not be more than a few years old. Certainly he'd been to the island in the East before, but not recently — perhaps two Sleeps ago.

Tom danced and laughed into the surf and out, kicking sand and singing at the gulls, and tossing pebbles up against the wall of stone that loomed above the beach. The search had never been in vain, he realized. There was another Tom somewhere, perhaps still on the island of Japan. That was all Tom thought about for months as he explored the countryside. He found nothing.

Several bloom-times later, just north of where Alexandria once stood, the lonely man encountered a stone structure, perhaps ten or twelve years old. He knew it was the work of the other, the one he now called Tom-Tom in his thoughts. Two Great Sleeps, and several intervening seasonal changes, later, he found another indication of Tom-Tom. It was on the island, north of Europe, just across the channel. Tom was certain the small edifice had been constructed a dozen Springs earlier.

It was shortly before his two thousandth birthday — although he, of course, no longer had any concept of his age — just days after awakening from his most recent prolonged Sleep, that he found the place and embers of a great fire. Immediately, he recognized that it was something planned. The grass for a circle many times his length was black, many logs still smouldered, the earth nearby was warm. While he had slept, Tom-Tom had passed no more than several miles away, made a great blaze and prepared a huge meal. The bones of several animals were scattered all about.

The old young man stared at the flame-wrought logs and the scorched area, and tears of frustration moved along his cheeks. Where had Tom-Tom gone? How could one possibly guess which way to follow? A fury of futility exploded in Tom's heart and he ran raging through the forest, finally careening headlong into an enormous tree.

He came to consciousness again, slowly, in the middle of the night, and lay until the morning, staring at the starless sky. Dawn came and he began his life once more, but somehow hope had faded. The chance that he would ever get that close to Tom-Tom was too remote to wonder on. It hadn't happened in the two millennia before; it wouldn't happen for a thousand years, or ten, or ever.

It was not long before Tom's life went back to being as it had been before it became preoccupied with another. Simultaneous with the loss of hope, the Great Sleeps stopped. After twenty Springs had come and gone, Tom had forgotten his periodic slumbers. He only vaguely recalled his dream of Tom-Tom, having finally decided that if there had ever been a Tom-Tom he had died, and really — deep within — doubting such another had been any more than dream, any more than sunlight on the Summer surface of Okceehobee. Tom-Tom had died, or never been at all.

The only thing the last man on earth ever thought about, except the weather, animals, food, wind, attitudes that clustered to make the days, was whether he was immortal, whether he would live forever.

He did.

END

YOUR POSTMASTER SUGGESTS:

Make Those ~~FASTER~~ Connections



A REPORT ON J. R. R. TOLKIEN

by LESTER DEL REY

Nothing could seem less revolutionary than being a Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, with a chief interest in such works as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the original. Yet Professor J. R. R. Tolkien is well on the way toward creating the major literary revolution of our generation.

The man not only writes about magic, but he seems capable of working spells in real life. No dictum of publishing or tradition of literature can withstand his quiet assault, as a simple listing of his achievements demonstrates.

The modern tradition is against fairy stories, even for children. But *The Hobbit* by Professor Tolkien had become a classic, and the publishers wanted a sequel. They got one — one based on the same characters, background and magic as the original, but for adults! Not only that, but it was to be in three volumes, with no false endings to make each volume stand as a complete book. The reader would have

to get it like a serial. And where long novels were selling for a few dollars, this one would come to fifteen dollars! No sane publisher should have risked such a venture, but George Allen & Unwin couldn't resist the book.

Nobody expected it to do well, and the American copyright on *The Lord of the Rings* was not protected, with the result that the work became public domain. It did quite well, however, with little but word-of-mouth advertising; my 1963 copy of the first book lists thirteen hard-cover printings. The work refused to die.

Everyone knows that a copyright is the author's only protection. But when the soft-cover volumes were issued, Tolkien was able to exercise control, even without legal protection. His simple request that only the authorized Ballantine edition be purchased was enough to make readers pay the extra twenty cents per volume and to force the other publisher to come to terms with him.

This created a major furor in publishing circles and established a tradition for which every writer must give perpetual and incredulous thanks.

Soft-cover books don't get serious reviews, normally. *The Lord of the Rings* received unusually full reviews. And for over a year, the books led the soft-cover best-seller list. They are still selling excellently, though there isn't a hint of "daring" words or events in them.

The new editions were published during the great youth revolt, when the young were supposed to be cynical about all values and turning to the literature of protest. Yet millions turned at once to these books, filled with such things as the love of beauty, the dignity of ordinary people, and the conflict of good and evil. They bore no resemblance to anything being read before — but they outsold everything else.

The Tale of Wonder passed from the literary scene about three hundred years ago. Its demise was noted by many and seemingly mourned by few. Yet today, as the result of one man's work, it is back with us. And it is causing excitement in the most serious academic circles, under the new name of mythopoetic literature.

This year Belknap College, in Center Harbor, N. H., will hold a serious conference on the works of J. R. R. Tolkien over the weekend of October 18-20, with joint sponsorship by the Tolkien Society of America. Many of the papers, to be published later, will deal with scholar-

ly aspects of mythopoetic literature. It took science fiction forty years to accomplish what Tolkien has achieved in three.

The revolution has had a major impact on all fantasy publishing. Five years ago, there was little market for fantasy; today, a great many publishers are actively seeking such fiction. Fantasy has suddenly become a "hot" item in soft-cover publishing.

Meantime, Professor Tolkien is working on another project that violates all normal publishing sense. Despite the fact that even serious books shouldn't have too many pages of notes and references, Tolkien finished his work of fiction with over a hundred pages of appendices — and the world developed there has been so fascinating that readers have insisted he give them still more.

He is now doing so — as he probably intended all along. He is working on what may be another three-volume novel about the age before that of the first novel — to be called *The Silmarillion*. After that, there is still an earlier age to provide a work now known as *The Akallabeth*.

Sometimes his publishers despair of ever having the final manuscripts, already long delayed by Professor Tolkien's tendency toward perfectionism. He is now 76, and the work of correlating all his notes and making countless revisions is seemingly endless.

But when a man consistently works miracles, nothing should be considered impossible.

— Lester del Rey

The Man Who Liked

by ROBERT HOSKINS

*He came bearing gifts
to old and young alike.*

He was a little man; he bobbed and twisted down the quiet suburban street, bowing to the ladies, smiling at the children and the pets. For the storekeepers hiding from the heat of the midsummer sun in the shade of the doorways, he had a loud and cheery greeting that made them smile back and return to their work with the comfortable feeling that maybe a bit of happiness existed in the world after all.

He paused by a Good Humor wagon, choosing, after long and careful deliberation with his finger rubbing his cheek, the Cherry Nugget Delight. The unwrapping of the ice cream was a study in sheer joyfully wasted motion; the savoring

of the first taste made a child laugh loudly at the silliness of it.

"What?" His eyes widened. "You laugh at me?"

The child giggled. "You're funny."

"So I am!" the little man cried. "And so are you! Everyone's funny — the whole world is nothing but one bundle of funny!"

He performed a pirouette, holding his coattails as he swirled around the street. The child clapped hands as he bowed low, then handed across another ice cream.

"For my most appreciative audience."

The child grabbed the treasure and ran quickly away. The little man beamed after the small greed

in the disappearing back, then turned and crossed the street, entering a little park. A dog ran up, sniffing at the half-eaten ice cream that was suddenly thrust in its face. The pink and brown goodness dropped to the ground and was quickly followed by a scattering of peanuts that came from a bag in his pocket. Chortling lustily, he dropped to a bench and waved his hands at the surrounding legions of pigeons.

The paving of the street danced mistily in the heat. The little man studied the pigeons for a moment, head bobbing from side to side in cadence with their walking and pecking, then he turned his attention to the sailboat that was listlessly becalmed on the surface of the duckpond. Dropping to his knees, the little man eased up behind the boat's master, sucking in wind until his cheeks were red with distortion. He let the air out with a *whoosh* that sent the little boat scuttling forward, then fell on his back, rolling on the deliciously cool, green grass.

He wearied of the park, of its air of summer somnolence. There was not enough life to suit his bursting soul. Bestowing a breezy benediction on a sleeping panhandler, he dropped a crumpled gift into the unfortunate's lap and continued down the street. Every shop window drew his momentary

attention; every young mother knew the warmth of his smile.

A flower peddler hobbled down the street, the woman as aged as the blossoms were young, each approaching an end of life from opposite directions. Struck by inspiration, he swept all of her wares from under her nose, leaving in their place a hundred times their hoped-for value. The old woman gasped, as did every woman thereafter who was startled by the baby bouquets suddenly and unexpectedly in their possession.

The little man continued down the street until the flowers were gone, and then turned into the first tavern. The interior was dark after the brightness of the street, and cool under the asthmatic wheeze of an over-labored air conditioner. An out-of-register color television set over the bar held the attention of the few patrons. Stepping to the counter, he slapped down a bill.

"Innkeeper! Drinks for all!"

The acned youth behind the bar was startled into sudden awareness, the magazine in his grasp slipping to the floor. He stared at the intruder for a moment, then spotted the color of his money. He leaped into action, pulling bottles from under-bar coolers. The other patrons were soon served and attention returned to the treator.

"For you — sir?"

"A glass of water, if you please. With an ice cube in it."

The simple request was fulfilled and the magic spell that incites all human wonders quickly rung up in the cash register.

"You forget yourself," the little man said, and the bartender hurried to his bidding. The bill reduced to a meagre pile of coins intrinsically worth considerably less than their face value, he pronounced a blessing on the assemblage, and then continued once more on his way.

The city drowsed in the heat of the sun as the little man continued dispensing his good will to those fortunate enough to cross his path. Suspicious natures found themselves inexplicably charmed into agreement with the proposition that life need not be eternally gloomy. Some even found themselves believing that peace on earth among men of good will might not be eternally unattainable.

It seemed as though the gods had finally decided to bestow their blessings on the tired surface of the weary planet, even if only in this one small city on this one exhausted afternoon. Only happiness mattered as once more laughter crept from the caverns and dark corners of society, finding an unsteady way to light.

Friendships were made easily, even if of brief moment. Hatred seemed an impossible emotion. Only

a few hundred of the city's citizens passed within the little man's orbit, but those few hundred helped pass the change within themselves on to others in a constantly widening circle that soon passed through almost the entire city.

And then the time came when the little man looked at his watch and gasped, "Good heavens! I'm late!"

Like the white rabbit, he scurried away, hopping aboard the first approaching bus. He stayed with it through the suburb and on to the state highway that stretched needle-sharp and straight North and South. Jumping off, he hurried along until he came to a cluster of modern adobe structures huddled behind the feeble protection of a baleful pink neon *Motel* sign.

He ran by the office door, raising his hand in brief greeting to the clerk inside the dark room. Once inside his unit, clothes were quickly stripped off and dropped onto the floor. Flesh followed as he went to the closet and drew down the long robe, adjusting the hood carefully over his shoulders.

He drew out the scythe, testing the edge against his thumb, then went over and sat down by the window.

In the middle of the hot summer afternoon, Death waited for the bombs to fall.

END

DELEND A EST...

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

*Rome still bestrode the Earth in
ancient might. And Vandal pride
was but an echo of ancient wars.*

Robert E. Howard died more than thirty years ago at the height of his writing career. His stories of heroic fantasy have a dash and color that have never been equalled, and the tales of King Kull and Conan the Cimmerian are as avidly read as ever. But not all his stories dealt with such fabled lands as Hyperborea and Valusia, and some of the unrelated ones were found among his papers after his death. Here is such a one — an original Howard fantasy, hitherto unpublished.

“It’s no empire, I tell you! It’s only a sham. Empire? Pahl! Pirates, that’s all we are!” It was Hunegais, of course, the ever moody and gloomy, with his braided black locks and drooping moustaches betraying his Slavonic blood. He sighed gustily, and the Falernian wine slopped over the rim of the jade goblet clenched in his brawny hand, to stain his purple, gilt-embroidered tunic. He drank noisily, after the manner of a horse, and returned with melancholy gusto to his original complaint.

"What have we done in Africa? Destroyed the big landholders and the priests, set ourselves up as landlords. Who works the land? Vandals? Not at all! The same men who worked it under the Romans. We've merely stepped into Roman shoes. We levy taxes and rents, and are forced to defend the land from the accursed Berbers. Our weakness is in our numbers. We can't amalgamate with the people! we'd be absorbed. We can't make allies and subjects out of them; all we can do is maintain a sort of military prestige — we are a small body of aliens sitting in castles and, for the present, enforcing our rule over a big native population — who, it's true, hates us no worse than they hated the Romans, but —"

"Some of that hate could be done away with," interrupted Athaulf. He was younger than Hunegais, clean shaven, and not unhandsome; his manners were less primitive. He was a Suevi, whose youth had been spent as a hostage in the East Roman court. "They are orthodox; if we could bring ourselves to renounce Arianism —"

"No!" Hunegais' heavy jaws came together with a snap that would have splintered lesser teeth than his. His dark eyes flamed with the fanaticism that was, among all the Teutons, the exclusive possession of his race. "Never! We are the masters! It is theirs to submit — not ours. We *know* the truth

of Arian; if the miserable Africans can not realize their mistake, they must be made to see it — by torch and sword and rack, if necessary!" Then his eyes dulled again, and with another gusty sigh from the depths of his belly, he groped for the wine jug.

"In a hundred years the Vandal kingdom will be a memory," he predicted. "All that holds it together now is the will of Genseric." He pronounced it Geiserich.

The individual so named laughed, leaned back in his carven ebony chair, and stretched out his muscular legs before him. These were the legs of a horseman; but their owner had exchanged the saddle for the deck of a war galley. Within a generation, he had turned a race of horsemen into a race of sea-rovers. He was the king of a race whose name had already become a term for destruction, and he was the possessor of the finest brain in the known world.

Born on the banks of the Danube and grown to manhood on that long trek westward, when the drifts of the nations crushed over the Roman palisades, he had brought to the crown forged for him in Spain all the wild wisdom the times could teach, in the feasting of swords and the surge and crush of races. His wild riders had swept the spears of the Roman rulers of Spain into oblivion. When the Visigoths and

the Romans joined hands and began to look southward, it was the intrigues of Genseric which brought Attila's scarred Huns swarming westward, tussling the flaming horizons with their myriad lances. Attila was dead now, and none knew where lay his bones and his treasures, guarded by the ghosts of five hundred slaughtered slaves; his name thundered around the world; but in his day he had been but one of the pawns moved resistlessly by the hand of the Vandal king.

And when, after Chalons, the Gothic hosts moved down through the Pyrenees, Genseric had not waited to be crushed by superior numbers. Men still cursed the name of Boniface, who called on Genseric to aid him against his rival, Aetius, and opened the Vandal's road to Africa. His reconciliation with Rome had been too late; vain as the courage with which he had sought to undo what he had done. Boniface died on a Vandal spear, and a new kingdom rose in the south. And now Aetius, too, was dead, and the great war galleys of the Vandals were moving northward, the long oars dipping and flashing silver in the starlight, the great vessels heeling and rocking to the lift of the waves.

And in the cabin of the foremost galley, Genseric listened to the conversation of his captains, and smiled gently as he combed his unruly yellow beard with his muscular

fingers. There was in his veins no trace of the Scythic blood which set his race somewhat aside from the other Teutons, from the long ago when scattered steppes-riders, drifting westward before the conquering Sarmatians, had come among the people dwelling on the upper reaches of the Elbe. Genseric was pure German; of medium height, with a magnificent sweep of shoulders and chest, and a massive corded neck, his frame promised as much of physical vitality as his wide blue eyes reflected mental vigor.

He was the strongest man in the known world, and he was a pirate — the first of the Teutonic searaiders whom men later called Vikings; but his domain of conquest was not the Baltic nor the blue North Sea, but the sunlit shores of the Mediterranean.

“And the will of Genseric,” he laughed, in reply to Hunegais' last remark, “is that we drink and feast and let tomorrow take care of itself.”

“So you say!” snorted Hunegais, with the freedom that still existed among the barbarians. “When did you ever let a tomorrow take care of itself? You plot and plot, not for tomorrow alone, but for a thousand tomorrows to come! You need not masquerade with us! We are not Romans to be fooled into thinking *you* are a fool — as Boniface was!”

"Aetius was no fool," muttered Thrasamund.

"But he's dead, and we are sailing on Rome," answered Hunegais, with the first sign of satisfaction he had yet evinced. "Alaric didn't get all the loot, thank God! And I'm glad Attila lost his nerve at the last minute — the more plunder for us."

"Attila remembered Chalons," drawled Athaulf. "There is something about Rome that lives — by the saints, it is strange. Even when the empire seems most ruined — torn, befouled, and tattered — some part of it springs into life again. Stilicho, Theodosius, Aetius — who can tell? Tonight in Rome there may be a man sleeping who will overthrow us all."

Hunegais snorted and hammered on the wine-stained board.

"Rome is as dead as the white mare I rode at the taking of Carthage! We have but to stretch out our hands and grasp the plunder of her!"

"There was a great general once who thought as much," said Thrasamund drowsily. "A Carthaginian, too, by God! I have forgotten his name. But he beat the Romans at every turn. Cut, slash, that was his way!"

"Well," remarked Hunegais, "he must have lost at last, or he would have destroyed Rome."

"That's so!" ejaculated Thrasamund.

"We are not Carthaginians," laughed Genseric. "And who said aught of plundering Rome? Are we not merely sailing to the imperial city in answer to the appeal of the Empress who is beset by jealous foes? And now, get out of here, all of you. I want to sleep."

The cabin door slammed on the morose predictions of Hunegais, the witty retorts of Athaulf, the mumble of the others. Genseric rose and moved over to the table, to pour himself a last glass of wine. He walked with a limp; a Frankish spear had girded him in the leg long years ago.

He lifted the jeweled goblet to his lips — wheeled with a startled oath. He had not heard the cabin door open, but a man was standing across the table from him.

"By Odin!" Genseric's Arianism was scarcely skin-deep. "What do you in my cabin?"

The voice was calm, almost placid, after the first startled oath. The king was too shrewd to often evince his real emotions. His hand stealthily closed on the hilt of his sword. A sudden and unexpected stroke —

But the man made no hostile movement. He was a stranger to Genseric, and the Vandal knew he was neither Teuton nor Roman. He was tall, dark, with a stately head, his flowing locks confined by a dark crimson band. A curling,

patriarchal beard swept his breast. A dim, misplaced familiarity twitched at the Vandal's mind as he looked.

"I have not come to harm you!" The voice was deep, strong, and resonant. Genseric could tell little of his attire, since he was masked in a wide dark cloak. The Vandal wondered if he grasped a weapon under that cloak.

"Who are you, and how did you get into my cabin?" he demanded.

"Who I am, it matters not," returned the other. "I have been on this ship since you sailed from Carthage. You sailed at night; I came aboard then."

"I never saw you in Carthage," muttered Genseric. "And you are a man who would stand out in a crowd."

"I dwell in Carthage," the stranger replied. "I have dwelt there for many years. I was born there, and my forefathers before me. Carthage is my life!" The last sentence was uttered in a voice so passionate and fierce that Genseric involuntarily stepped back, his eyes narrowing.

"The folk of the city have some cause of complaint against us," said he. "But the looting and destruction was not by my orders. Even then it was my intention to make Carthage my capital. If you suffered loss by the sack, why —"

"Not from your wolves," grimly answered the other. "Sack of the city? I have seen such a sack as

not even you, barbarian, have dreamed of! They call you barbaric. I have seen what civilized Romans can do."

"Romans have not plundered Carthage in my memory," muttered Genseric, frowning in some perplexity.

"Poetic justice!" cried the stranger, his hand emerging from his cloak to strike down on the table. Genseric noted that the hand was muscular yet white, the hand of an aristocrat. "Roman greed and treachery destroyed Carthage, trade rebuilt her in another guise. Now you, barbarian, sail from her harbors to humble her conqueror! Is it any wonder that old dreams silver the cords of your ships and creep amidst the holds, and that forgotten ghosts burst their immemorial tombs to glide upon your decks?"

"Who said anything of humbling Rome?" uneasily demanded Genseric. "I merely sail to arbitrate a dispute as to succession —"

"Pah!" Again the hand slammed down on the table. "If you knew what I know, you would sweep that accursed city clean of life before you turn your prow southward again. Even now, those you sail to aid plot your ruin — and a traitor is on board your ship!"

"What do you mean?" Still there was neither excitement nor passion in the Vandal's voice.

"Suppose I gave you proof that

your most trusted companion and vassal plots your ruin with those to whose aid you lift your sails?"

"Give me that proof; then ask what you will," answered Genseric with a touch of grimness.

"Take this in token of faith!" The stranger rang a coin on the table, and caught up a silken girdle which Genseric himself had carelessly thrown down.

"Follow me to the cabin of your counsellor and scribe, the handsomest man among the barbarians —"

"Athaulf?" In spite of himself, Genseric started. "I trust him beyond all others."

"Then you are not as wise as I deemed you," grimly answered the other. "The traitor within is to be feared more than the foe without. It was not the legions of Rome which conquered *me* — it was the traitors within my gates. Not alone in swords and ships does Rome deal, but with the souls of men. I have come from a far land to save your empire and your life. In return I ask but one thing: drench Rome in blood!"

For an instant the stranger stood transfigured, mighty arm lifted, fist clenched, dark eyes flashing fire. An aura of terrific power emanated from him, aweing even the wild Vandal. Then sweeping his purple cloak about him with a kingly gesture, the man stalked to the door and through it, despite Genseric's

exclamation and effort to detain him.

Swearing in bewilderment, the king limped to the door, opened it, and glared out on the deck. A lamp burned on the poop. A reek of unwashed bodies came up from the hold where the weary rowers toiled at their oars. The rhythmic clack vied with a dwindling chorus from the ships which followed in a long ghostly line. The moon struck silver from the waves, shone white on the deck. A single warrior stood on guard outside Genseric's door, the moonlight sparkling on his crested golden helmet and Roman corselet. He lifted his javelin in salute.

"Where did he go?" demanded the king.

"Who, my lord?" inquired the warrior stupidly.

"The tall man, dolt," exclaimed Genseric impatiently. "The man in the purple cloak who just left my cabin."

"None has left your cabin since the lord Hunegais and the others went forth, my lord," replied the Vandal in bewilderment.

"Liar!" Genseric's sword was a ripple of silver in his hand as it slid from its sheath. The warrior paled and shrank back.

"As God is my witness, king," he swore, "no such man have I seen this night."

Genseric glared at him; the Vandal king was a judge of men and he knew this one was not lying. He

felt a peculiar twitching of his scalp, and turning without a word, limped hurriedly to Athaulf's cabin. There he hesitated, then threw open the door.

Athaulf lay sprawled across a table in an attitude which needed no second glance to classify. His face was purple, his glassy eyes distended, and his tongue lolled out blackly. About his neck, knotted in such a knot as seamen make, was Genseric's silken girdle. Near one hand lay a quill, near the other, ink and a piece of parchment. Catching it up, Genseric read laboriously.

To her majesty, the empress of Rome:

I, thy faithful servant, have done thy bidding, and am prepared to persuade the barbarian I serve to delay his onset on the imperial city until the aid you expect from Byzantium has arrived. Then I will guide him into the bay I mentioned, where he can be caught as in a

vise and destroyed with his whole fleet, and —

The writing ceased with an erratic scrawl. Genseric glared down at him, and again the short hairs lifted on his scalp. There was no sign of the tall stranger, and the Vandal knew he would never be seen again.

"Rome shall pay for this," he muttered. The mask he wore in public had fallen away; the Vandal's face was that of a hungry wolf. In his glare, in the knotting of his mighty hand, it took no sage to read the doom of Rome. He suddenly remembered that he still clutched in his hand the coin the stranger had dropped on his table. He glanced at it, and his breath hissed between his teeth, as he recognized the characters of an old, forgotten language, the features of a man which he had often seen carved in ancient marble in old Carthage, preserved from Roman hate.

"Hannibal!" muttered Genseric.

END

THIS MONTH IN GALAXY —

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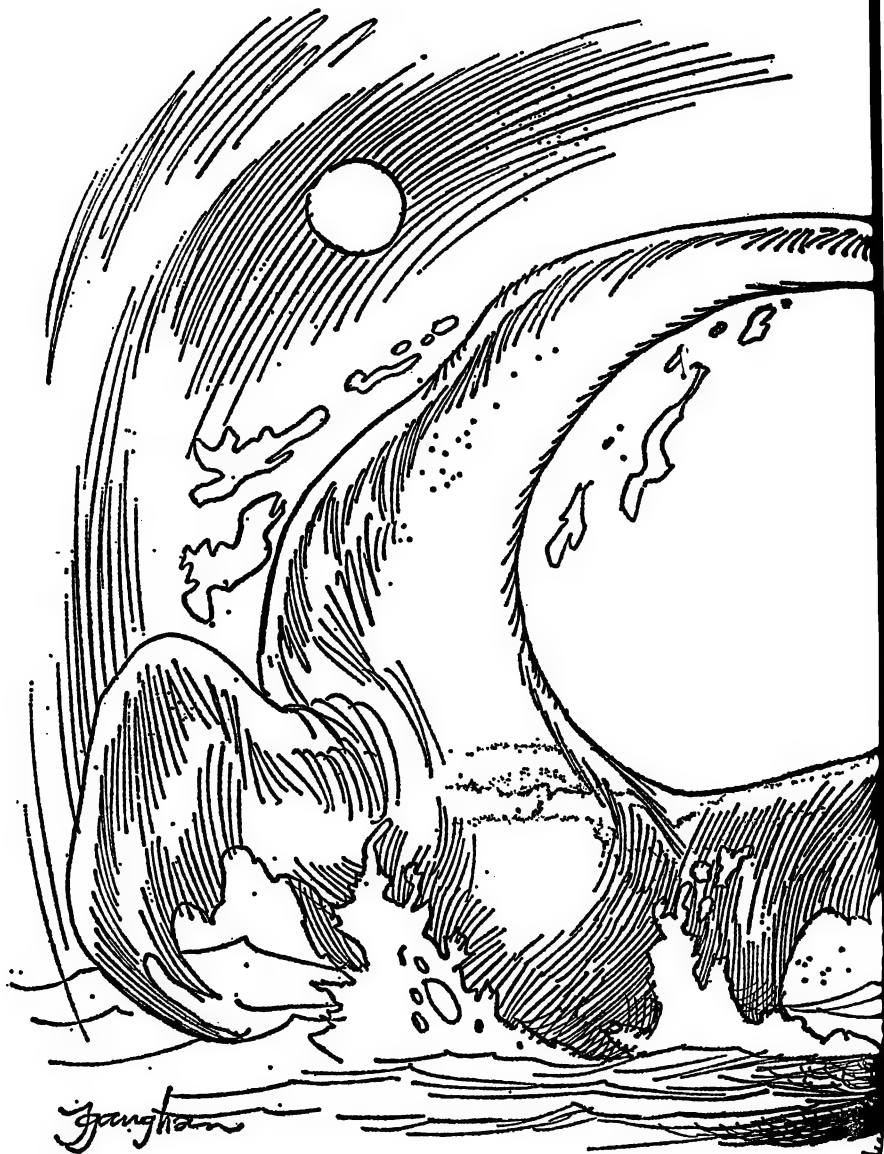
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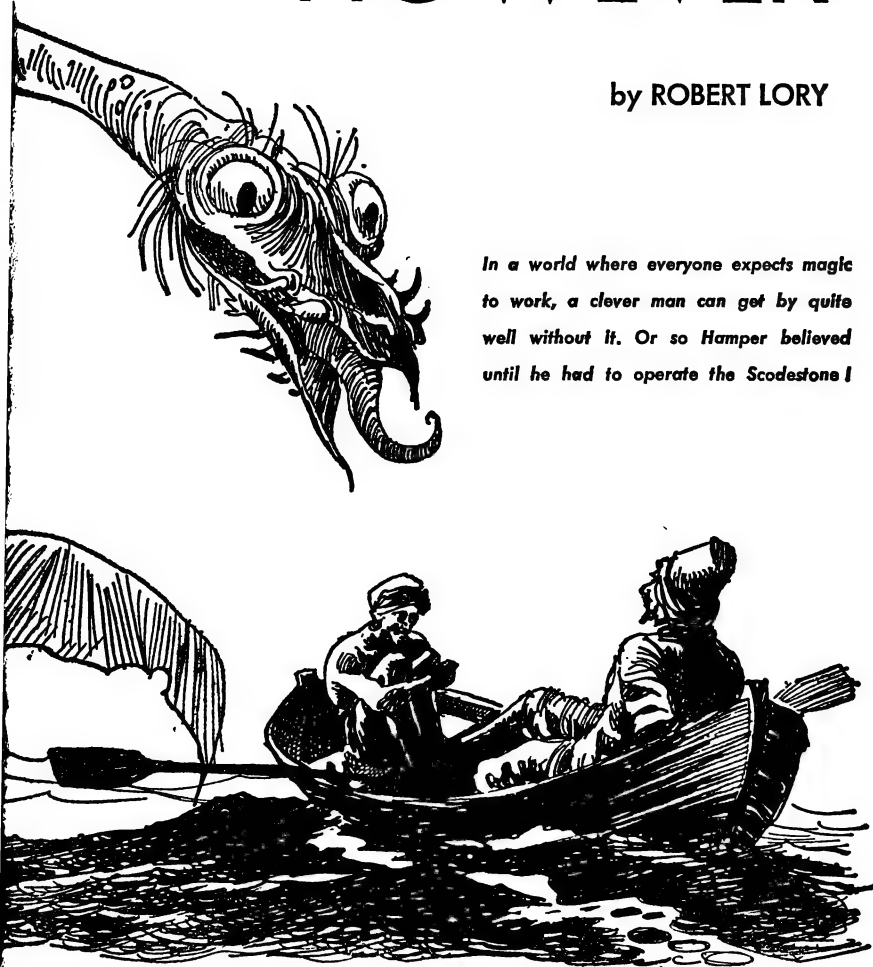
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HOWEVER

by ROBERT LORY

In a world where everyone expects magic to work, a clever man can get by quite well without it. Or so Hamper believed until he had to operate the Scodestone!



Forenote: It is recorded that the kingdom of Balik had an official However of exceptional ability. Every king, of course, is in need of someone to however at all times. But strangely, few Howevers are truly popular with their monarchs.

Hence, when the call came from the country of Overnon asking for a messenger on an important mission, the king of Balik was less loathe to release Hamper the However than might have been supposed. It is said that the king had tired of watching Hamper's tricks with the switchblade he carried in his pegleg; however, that may be only idle rumor.

And since the king was well aware of Hamper's ability to find a however for every occasion, three golden dorpal hawks — somewhat akin to the fabulous Harpies — were assigned to keep him on his proper way. Failing that, they were free to select pieces of him at their choice for appetizers.

Hamper set out as intended. However, somehow he chose to go to Overnon by way of Grath...

I

“You will remember the name of Arkfangubo?” the ancient man leading the weary camel asked. “You promised such.”

The However Hamper swung his heavy pegleg over the saddle and,

hopping to the ground, smiled reassuringly.

“I did so promise,” said Hamper. “And let it be said again, as it has been truly said in the past, that a promise is a promise and no less than that. I assure you I will honor my word in the manner always accustomed to myself.”

Thus satisfied that he had honored his word in the manner always accustomed to himself, Hamper hoisted his knapsack on his round shoulder and looked about in the light of Trovo's silvery moon. The task at hand was to choose himself a boatsman.

First, of course, one had to find boatsmen from which to choose, and though the boats tied to the docks along which Hamper now tramped were numerous, boatsmen seemed rare. There was one — a tall, thin, rather angular fellow bailing out a small four-oar vessel.

Hamper sat on the dock, his legs crossed in front. The boat and master looked sufficient for the job, he reflected. Although both seemed in need for repair, both looked hardy enough for the trip ahead, even if not for the trip back. However, the trip back was not Hamper's concern. “I wish to hire out a boat and master. If indeed that is a boat and if you are in fact its master, perhaps you will wish to accept the employment.”

"And where is it you wish to go?" asked the boatsman.

"To Overnon, east of Groth, across the Little Sea."

"Overnon, is it? Flatly I say I will not venture near that enchanted land." The thin man scratched his chin. "Groth is another matter, although surely you are aware of the dangers of the Little Sea betwixt here and there. I think you shall find no one willing to take you from Grath to Groth directly. I for one will not, and I say that again flatly."

"No one goes from Grath to Groth?"

"Not directly. One must travel to the western end of Grath to the Dolorous Cliffs where the waters of the Little Sea narrow before they meet the far-reaching Great Sea. There, at the Narrows, as they are appropriately called, one crosses over into Groth."

"You mean to say that, to reach the lands to the east of Groth, I must travel far to the western parts of Grath and cross from there into the western parts of Groth? To say the least, this is peculiarly uneconomic."

Hamper considered. He could, he supposed, contrive to get further east along this coast rather than west, but those pesky dorpel hawks might decide he was stalling and come down to sample him.

"Very well," he said to the boatsman. "Shall we consider you and your boat hired to transport me to the Dolorous Cliffs where, as you say, we may cross with ease?"

"Anything may be considered — but such considerations also involve the consideration of price."

Hamper smiled. "Naturally. But before we make that price firm, let me add that our contract would also call for your carrying me — and my magical implements — eastward along the shorewaters of Groth to the mouth of the Non River."

"A most difficult and time-consuming task you propose," mullled the boatsman. "Which of course adds weight to the price."

Hamper patted his knapsack. "I travel at the invitation of the Mistress of Overnon, to advise her on scientific matters."

"Traveling to visit such an esteemed individual, no doubt you carry with you the wealth necessary to finance such a journey."

Hamper looked blankly at the boatsman. "At the Lady's request, I carry with me only a few of my most potent magics, trusting as I do in the good hearts and hospitality of my fellow man as I wander on my way."

The boatsman's face grew taut. Then I suggest you continue to so wander, good fellow, remaining faithful to your trust."

"Meaning, I take it, that you do not wish to ferry me to my destination?"

Meaning precisely that. You, good sir, may be able to take off a year or so from your labors to go a-questing. But not me. Thus I suggest you be on your way so I may return to my work. Poor folk like me can ill afford the luxury of idle jawing."

Hamper shook his head. "Which of course, is why you remain poor. Money have I none, good man, but magic I have aplenty. Now normally I would not offer even a farthing's worth of spells to such a dull fellow as yourself but, seeing into your innermost heart as my powers allow me, I would be willing to exchange a potent protective ointment for the trip I have outlined. In exchange for the trip plus a small cash supplement to make up the inadequacy of what you have to offer."

"Inadequacy? That comes as a bit of a surprise to me, good magician," snorted the thin man. "I will trade even, if any trade at all is warranted. After all, it is you who desires the ferrying from me. I am in need of no special magic."

"Not even," Hamper said measuredly, "not even an elixir that, when applied to your neck and ears, makes you immune to the terrors that rule the Little Sea?"

Immunity to terror needed mostly confidence.

The boatsman scratched his chin. "Immune?"

"Totally and irrevocably. No monster of the deep will be able to touch you. You and you alone shall be king of the boatsmasters of Grath, because you and you alone will be fearless in facing the cruel waters. You shall be poor no longer, but instead will be rich beyond compare if — if you help this lone wayfarer in his ginang-melting mission."

Again the boatsman's hand went to his chin. "You will pay in advance? I ask only that I can be sure I — and you — have effective protection in our journey."

"Certainly, I shall pay in advance. I am a trusting soul; knowing beyond doubt that faith in my fellow man is well placed, earning as it does unsuspected dividends in kindness and good works."

"Oh, it is truth that you speak, good sir. But I long to see this elixir."

"Then put an end to your longing, fellow traveler," said Hamper who, with sufficient flourish, produced from his knapsack a small clear glass bottle which contained a thick reddish liquid. "Lo, the elixir is at hand."

The boatsman examined the bottle suspiciously. "What you have at hand looks strangely like cat-sup."

"A disguise, my friend, to protect its identity from those who might be tempted to steal from a wayfaring magician."

The boatsman pulled the stopper from the bottle and sniffed. "It smells rather like catsup, also — it even tastes like catsup."

"Truly a miraculous disguise! If you'd care to examine other miracles I could show you a gold-retrieving substance which looks like dried beef or an invisibility potion which resembles nothing as much as a carrot. But, come now, place a small quantity of your protective shield on the back of your neck and behind your ears. For the night moves on, and we must needs be off."

"It seems sticky like catsup, too," observed the boatsman. "Are you certain that this is indeed your disguised elixir, that you have not somehow confounded it with a bottle of true catsup?"

"Good friend," Hamper said patiently, "why would a master magician like myself be carrying a bottle of catsup? I ask you that, in full apology for asking the ridiculous of such a cunning fellow as yourself."

The boatsman hesitated then nodded. "All right, we go. But, master wizard, if we are in fact protected from whatever the Little Sea might produce, why should we bother talking any longer, more arduous route? Why do we not in-

stead cross directly from Grath to Groth, directly from here to there?"

"A noble suggestion," Hamper replied. "However, a sage full of mystic wisdom once said that the shorter route is sometimes the longer by far. Or, as another highly respected saying has it, first thoughts are usually the best."

"But is it not also said, when you make haste prepare for distaste?"

Hamper tugged at his earlobe. "True, that has been said. But it does not come from very good authority, that I can assure you. Now, let us be off while Trovo's moon shines favorably."

II

The night was cold and as the boatsman applied himself to one of the two sets of oars, Hamper shivered. Intruding on his comfort also was the fact that his peg-leg and good leg were immersed ankle-deep in the chilly off-shore waters of the Little Sea which during the passage had entered the craft. "The least you could have done," he complained, "was supply your passenger with a blanket for warmth."

"Such things add weight to the vessel," replied the boatsman. "I myself feel no cold."

"That is because you have your labor to keep you warm."

"You would prefer to take the extra set of oars, then?"

"Certainly not," Hamper said sourly. "Magicians learn to shoulder their griefs without undue complaint?" the boatsman asked.

"You may trust in that," Hamper replied, hugging his knees. "Now what is it? Why do you laugh, churl?" So asking, he looked up and, following the boatsman's gaze to the port side, gasped.

"He thinks he can hurt us," laughed the boatsman. "But we know better — eh, magician?"

Hamper's heart stopped. "How well we know," he coughed out.

The thing in the water — or that part of it which had risen out of the water — was the size of a medium bracket castle. Green and red and slimy, it was mostly head and neck and two fierce yellow eyes. And teeth — long, sharp, yellowish teeth.

"Ho-ha!" shouted the boatsman.

"Ho-ha," Hamper repeated weakly.

"I defy you, monster!"

The boatsman's words planted the germ of an old idea in Hamper's head. "Defy him, indeed! Recognize you not the serpent Brandlebronn? A spirit of protection is this mighty inhabitant of the deep. We must ask his blessing, for it would be ungracious for us not to do so."

"I have not heard of the serpent Brandlebronn," shouted the

boatsman. "And what need have we of a blessing? We are protected by your all-powerful elixir!"

"Er, yes — however, it is the power of Brandlebronn which makes it effective. If we affront him now, he may withdraw that power. Then where should we be?"

The boatsman considered. "But how does one ask for the serpent's blessing? I have no idea of the proper customs in such doings."

"One need merely stroke the serpent's tongue. That is the accepted way," Hamper explained. "But we must hurry, else Brandlebronn may misunderstand."

"You go first, magician. I will do as you do, so as not to err."

Noting the serpent's distance from the boat shortening rapidly, Hamper tensed his body at the boat's edge. "Would that I could so instruct you, but as master of this vessel you by custom must be pleased first. Quickly — we must dive overboard and meet the great friend of the sea."

As the cold water enveloped his body, Hamper struck out immediately for the shoreline, away from the great friend of the sea.

"Sir!" came the call from behind him. "I just realized. As my employer, it is actually you who commands the vessel as master!"

"An oversight on my part!" Hamper shouted over his shoulder. "We'd better make a swim for it!"

But the boatsman didn't reply. All Hamper heard was the crunching jaws of the serpent. Reassuringly, both sounds came from a point far to Hamper's rear.

It was morning when the Dolorous Cliffs finally loomed on the horizon to the west. High above, a faint speck of gold hovered. Mercifully, it came no lower.

Hamper hobbled wearily along the white-sand shoreline of Grath, his pegleg and good foot splashing shin-high in the dark waters. The salty sea soothed the tired flesh of toes and sole, but Hamper was careful not to let either his weariness or the siren flip-flap of the wavelets against his legs relax him into an incaution. The Little Sea did have its dangers, after all. Most bothersome, too, if the particular danger he'd encountered was representative.

He had met no one during his five-hour hike but surely, he reasoned, there had to be a settlement of some kind on the Grath side of the Narrows. However, the world being what it was, one could never be really sure about much of anything. He was relieved, therefore, when he sighted the outline of the small village at the sheer, white cliffsides. The sun was at mid-morning position when he entered the settlement and approached a hefty villager carrying a small bundle of twigs.

"I say, good man," Hamper began, "I wish to cross the Narrows. I'd be most appreciative if you'd direct me to an honest and able boatsman."

"Your appreciation is appreciated," answered the villager. "At the end of this street, you will find a yellow building. This is the hall of the Narrows Guild of Shipmakers and Moorers, all of whose members are reputed to be both able and honest since there is but one member and he has that reputation. His name is Tachio, but I do not think he'll be of much help to you."

"And why is that?" Hamper asked.

"That is not for me to say, but for Tachio. Myself, I must be on my way with my burden of wood."

Hamper surveyed the bundle of twigs. "If you may allow me a question, your burden puzzles me. You carry wood, which from the look of it is intended for a fire-place, yet this happens to be a doubly warm season in an already warm climate. I am puzzled also by the smallness of your load. Surely a man of your bulk could manage a more sizable burden."

The villager nodded. "Your observations are sound, except for the fact that wood is not burned in our fireplaces. As you say, there is no need. In fact, there is absolutely no need whatsoever that this bundle of sticks satisfies — at

least, none that I can imagine. That is why I carry such a small amount of it with me."

"But why, if it fills no need?"

The villager answered with good humor, "Because, good sir, I am a woodcarrier, as my father and his father before him were woodcarriers. Now I ask you to reason this — how would folk know I am a woodcarrier if I did not indeed carry wood?"

"But . . . but why did your father — "

"And his father before him," the woodcarrier added proudly.

"And his father — why did they carry wood?"

"It was their occupation. A man must have an occupation, you know. And I must be getting about mine, as there are several sections of the village in which I've not yet carried wood this morning. It's a hard occupation, woodcarrying is, but not as hard as some. I have a cousin, for instance, who is a piglifter, and there is a neighbor of mine who's a stonethrower. Both of them suffer from acute pains in the arm. I have another cousin, though, who has the perfect occupation. He is a winedrinker. But I suppose one must be satisfied with one's station in life."

The villager sighed and, turning, left Hamper tugging his ear. Well, on to Tachio, he decided and continued down the street. Not

many folk were abroad this morning, he noted as he approached the yellow building to which he'd been directed. As he came nearer, however, he could not help noticing the two elderly women sitting under the sign which proclaimed GUILD HALL. Nor could he help stopping to watch their curious activity, which seemed to consist of banging the ground repeatedly with steel hammers.

Upon closer inspection, he saw that one of the women — both looked alike and Hamper supposed them to be twins — was using her hammer to bend nails into ninety-degree L-shaped forms. After each nail was so deformed it went into a pile from which the other woman drew. Her task, which demanded equal effort in hammer-pounding, was to straighten each nail. The straightened nails went into a second pile, from which the first woman drew. In all, there were about thirty nails being bent, straightened, and bent again.

"Good morning, fine sir," said one of the women, the one whose task was straightening. "We are pleased that you appear to find our work interesting."

"Now, don't tell me," Hamper said. "Your occupation is that of a nailstraightener, while that of your co-worker is nailbender."

The two ladies chuckled, almost but not quite missing a beat.

"Dear me, no," answered she to whom Hamper had spoken. "My occupation is that of carpenter's helper. I help the carpenter by straightening bent nails so that he can use them when he has need."

"But your co-worker — " Hamper began.

"My sister's job is to provide me with nails with which I may work. There are not all that many bent nails to be found in our village, I assure you. She is a nail conserver."

Hamper considered. "But what happens when the carpenter calls for his nails? Then the nail conserver has nothing to work with."

The first woman frowned. "The *carpenter* call for his nails? Don't be impertinent, young man. The carpenter's job is to nail things together, not to pick up nails and carry them to himself. Even if it were possible for a carpenter to carry nails to himself, which logic and common sense tells us it isn't, the picking up and carrying of nails is the work of a nailporter."

"And that job at the present time isn't filled," cackled the second woman. "Perhaps, sir, if you seek a position in our village — "

"I have an occupation at present," Hamper said quickly, stepping to the door and making ready to knock.

"You're a door-knocker!" exclaimed the first old woman.

"How lovely!" cooed the second.

"I've long felt that Thical should be replaced. He lacked dedication in his pounding, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, I do," agreed her sister.

"Well, I don't," Hamper said gruffly, cocking back his fist and sighting down the door. "I'm not a door-knocker at all."

The two ladies let their hammers fall to the ground. "*Not* a door-knocker?" said the first. "Then you mustn't go around knocking on doors."

"Strictly forbidden," said the second. "Why, if you were to knock on that door, we would wait for the listener-informer to make his rounds, upon which we would tell him of your breach of occupation. Whereupon he would contact the constable who would tell the magistrate who in turn would order the arrestmaker to arrest you. He would then turn you over to the shark-feeder who would dub you honorary sharkfood and, I'm here to tell you, you wouldn't like that."

"It's true I wouldn't," Hamper agreed. "But if I must wait for the official door-knocker, when does the fellow make his appearance?"

III

The sun was in the afternoon sky when a dried up, bent-backed man with the complexion of a prune approached the Guild Hall door and knocked weakly. As he turned

to leave, Hamper awoke from the sleep he'd fallen into. "Door-knocker," he began, "I pray, door-knocker — "

"No need for formality, my son. Name's Thical," was the high-pitched response.

"Thical, then. I pray that you thump the door more soundly so that Tachio might know someone is here and open the door."

Thical observed Hamper impassively. "Tachio open the door? Think you that Tachio is a door-opener?"

Hamper leaped to his feet. "Well then, whoever opens the door! My point is that he can't hear you."

The door-knocker nodded. "Probably not, but what concern of mine is that? Nobody opens doors for me, anyway. They know it's just Thical the door-knocker making his daily rounds. Besides, if I were to knock loudly, I might wake up someone inside who's sleeping. I wouldn't want to do that."

"No, I suppose not." Hamper's mind began working. "Wait, don't leave just yet." If he allowed Thical to depart, he might never get inside the hall. But how. . . . And then he knew how. "Let me ask you, good door-knocker, have you ever thought of taking on an apprentice, someone to take over after you've retired?"

Thical considered the question. "I have thought of retirement, but it is a sad thought," he whined. "I

have no sons to follow me in my occupation, yet it is an occupation that needs doing, is it not?"

"It is indeed," said the two ladies together.

"And this young man looks so nice," said the carpenter's helper.

"I thank you," said Hamper. "I suppose I should begin practicing immediately."

With which he pounded heavily with both fists upon the wooden door. Following ten solid seconds of such pounding the door swung open abruptly. The man in the doorway was of Hamper's height and girth. He wore a shipmaster's cap and a ferocious facial expression.

"Thical! Do you try to crash the door inward?" he demanded.

The two ladies gasped, Hamper thought at first because the man in the doorway wore nothing else but a shipmaster's cap and a ferocious facial expression, but that was not the reason.

"He answered his door! Tachio answered his door!" said one of the women.

"We shall report this breach to the listener-informer!" declared the other.

Tachio frowned at the two women who under the impact of his gaze returned to their hammering as though nothing had happened. Then, looking full into Hamper's face, he said, "You're not Thical."

"No," said Thical. "I'm Thical."

"My name is Hamper. I am a traveler," Hamper said pleasantly.

"Then get about your occupation as others do. Travel."

The door banged shut. Hamper's face reddening, his fists again applied themselves in banging.

"Very good, my son," said Thical. "But don't you think it would be best to practice on a variety of doors?"

"Now what is it?" demanded the face of Tachio in the doorway.

"There are thin doors and fat doors," Thical explained, "short doors, tall doors —"

"I cannot travel," Hamper said over Thical's voice, "without your help. That is why I am here."

"He did it again," whispered the carpenter's helper to the nail conserver. "That's twice he did it."

"Then we shall report it twice," replied the nail conserver.

"Wooden doors, steel doors, plain doors —"

"He answered his door, he answered his door — that's exactly what we'll say."

"— ornamental doors with windows or —"

"*Jabbercrook!*" bellowed Tachio who, grasping Hamper firmly by the lapels, pulled him through the doorway.

"— functional hand-knockers or sometimes bells —"

As the crashing door cut off Thical's voice, Tachio released his grip on Hamper's front. He sighed.

"Now, sit and tell me what you want. I'm a busy man."

"You answered your own door," Hamper observed.

"Knock off the jabbercrook and get to it, boy. The point — why you are standing outside trying to bust my door down."

"But don't you care if the old biddies tell the listener-informer and you wind up honorary shark-food?"

Tachio smiled. "My brother is the sharkfeeder."

Hamper winked knowingly. "Political pull; it can be helpful."

"Nothing of the sort. There just aren't any sharks. Haven't been for years, but if my brother admits it he'll be out of work. Now, to your business here."

"I want to cross the Narrows."

"Good fortune to you, then. I trust you're a strong swimmer. Water's got a real current. Bit cool, too, this time of year."

"Let me put it more plainly," Hamper said. "What I wish to do is hire a boat to take me across the Narrows and proceed from the Groth side along the coastline until such time as we come to the Non River, whereupon the vessel would turn southward and proceed up that river to Overnon where I have business. That is what I require."

"A most thorough documentation of your needs, traveler," Tachio replied. "Naturally, I can't help you in the least."

"Naturally you *can't*? But you're the sole member of the Narrows Guild of Shipmakers, Masters and Moorers. If you can't help me, who can?"

"Churur will be here shortly. He will offer you aid," Tachio said quietly.

"Churur being a shipmaster?"

"Not at all. I am, as you say, the only shipmaster at this end of Grath. It is simply that there is no ship for me to master."

"Then why, as a *shipmaker*, do you not make one?"

Tachio inhaled deeply. "Friend, I do not criticize the way in which you go about your occupation as traveler. Churur will be here. He always appears when a new face is reported in the village. Since his business is transportation, he knows his services will be required, as who comes to this village who does not wish to move on?"

"Valid thinking on this Churur's part," Hamper said. "How, though, does he get away with transporting people? I thought you were the sole transporter this end of Garth?"

"I am the sole *sailor*. Churur does not transport by sea."

"However, I wish to get to Goth. One doesn't do that by land."

"Accurately stated, good traveler. Churur transports by air. More precisely, his *dulcanarg* does."

Hamper thought over Tachio's

words. "Churur is the reason, then, why you have no ships? It is a matter of competition?"

"In a way. Churur told us when he arrived — he is not of our village — that he and his flying beast were now the sole means of transportation available to travelers wishing to cross the Narrows. He added with much logical weight that any seaman who desired to contest this statement would be swallowed whole by the *dulcanarg*. The soundness of his argument appealed to those of us in the Guild." Tachio sighed. "I mean to cast doubt on no man's word, but it has been rumored that travelers who have entrusted their safety to Churur have not arrived fully operative on the Goth side of the Dolorous Cliffs. It has been stated that perhaps a better, more descriptive occupational title for Churur would be that of *dulcanarg-feeder*."

"In other words, I should not entrust myself to this Churur?"

"I have not said that. But as the old saying goes, he who put all his eggs in one basket may look forward to seeing them scrambled long before breakfast."

"However," replied Hamper, "it is also said, and just as truly, that he who spreads himself too thin cannot expect to make much of an impact."

"So true, but the impact one might make dropping from, say, 4000 feet above the earth might

be deemed other than desirable," Tachio countered. He walked to a window. "But what you do is your decision and decide you must shortly, for Churur comes now."

IV

Night had fallen when the How-
ever of Balik looked full into the face of the dulcanarg. In the light of Churur's campfire atop the Grathian Dolorous Cliffs, the beast did not invoke a spirit of confidence.

"True, his countenance is fierce. But he flies straight and swift," Churur said, gesturing to the leatherlike wings, the span of which when fully extended Hamper figured at fifty yards.

"I suppose the flight is expensive?" Hamper asked, measuring Churur's reaction. A medium-sized man, the dulcanarg-master's main features were a closely cropped beard and beady ash-gray eyes.

"Not at all expensive. No traveler has complained that the price is too dear, I can assure you."

Hamper smiled. "It occurs to me that a traveler of lesser backbone than myself might fear for his life riding the great lizard. He doesn't look at all docile."

"Ah, but is it not written that appearances often deceive? As it is true with many life forms, so it is with dulcanargs, that ugliness is but skin deep."

As if on cue, the dulcanarg grinned a long, sharp, toothy grin.

"Certainly he looks friendly enough, upon closer inspection," Hamper responded with a slight shiver. "But, tell me, I suppose he must cost you much for his care, especially his feeding."

Churur added his grin to that of his beast's. "He loves a full belly, that I must admit, but who does not? As for the cost involved, I find it not overmuch. The living I make from crossers of the Narrows like yourself is quite enough. The way I often put it is, a traveler a day keeps hunger away."

"A traveler a day? There are that many people making the trip from Grath to Groth?" Hamper asked.

"Not at all. It's just a pet expression of mine. But with that trade and whatever additional services we may offer when our bellies need filling we manage quite nicely."

"That is good to hear in these hard times. However, we have not yet discussed what price will be asked of me for this journey."

"We can discuss that in the morning," Churur said cordially, "after a good night's rest. You shall sleep here, of course. No reason at all for you to tramp the long path down to the village."

"I thank you for your kind invitation. However, I have been invited for my night's reports else-

where. Tachio the shipmaster expects me, and it wouldn't do for me to deprive him of my company my last night in Grath."

So saying, Hamper began the descent down the steep mountain trail, ever on the watch over his shoulder. "I've done far too much hiking in recent time," he remonstrated with himself. "However, I certainly would have been foolish to have closed my eyes in the presence of that hungry monster. I would indeed be foolish ever to ascend to the clifftop again. Unfortunately, however, this blackguard and his winged serpent seem to be the only way I can cross to the south. As Tachio truly said, the swim would be a long one. However, the flight on the dulcanarg's back might prove too short."

Lost in howevering with himself, Hamper sat on a rock to the left side of the trail. A rustling in the bushes farther to the left caused him to slip quietly behind the rock. His heart had beat fewer than fifteen times when a large figure passed the rock and stepped out into the open trail. It was not just one figure, Hamper saw, as the now-full moonlight played upon the features of both.

"Grawwickk rummff!"

"That would appear to be the case," Churur said solemnly. "For a chubby fellow he moves along at a pace."

"Murrffel glorkkummyarnk," the dulcanarg complained.

Churur nodded. "It's your own fault, you looking so eager. That's why he didn't stay the night, so don't complain about having to hunt him down. You're greedy, that's what. And I must admit I long to peek at the treasures his knapsack surely must hold. Pray you be careful not to digest this one's money belt as you've happened to do on former occasions."

It is said and truly, Hamper thought to himself when the two had pounded along down the trail, that when no one's about, the claws come out.

The next morning when Hamper stepped into Churur's clifftop encampment he was pleased to note that both man and beast were red-eyed and surprised to see him.

"Well, *hello*," Churur responded, recovering control over himself. "You are early, I'm glad to see."

"Gruruouf," said the dulcanarg, licking his chops.

"It's the early bird that catches the song," Hamper quoted. "And now if you've breakfasted, I'd like to be off."

"Our breakfast can wait until after your journey's end, my friend," said Churur. He motioned to the dulcanarg who eagerly positioned itself for the affixing of the double-seated saddle which strapped tightly around the creature's

midsection directly behind its huge wings.

"You, good customer, shall sit in front where it is safer. Not only will the stirrups hold you in place but the reins which I, behind you, shall hold will give you support to each side. I would not want you to fear falling, so would put you at your ease before we ascend to the high heights above."

As Hamper tested his stirrups, he noticed that they were somewhat slippery. Looking downward he saw a black greaselike substance on their inside. So that was it?

"Why is it," he asked, "why is it we must ascend to the high heights above? Surely we can cross at cliff-level."

"We could, of course," Churur said as he climbed aboard and gripped the reins which now encircled Hamper. "But the view is so elegant from up there that I could not in fairness deny the sight to you. You can see far to the west — and to the east. Few have seen these sights, but many have risked their lives and lost them in trying."

"I can believe that," Hamper said. While Churur had been engaged in selling the view, Hamper had been busy too. Manipulating his good leg and pegleg, he had wrapped the stirrup straps tightly around them, to the point that his posterior was now firmly implanted in the dulcanarg's back.

"But let us be on our way. I grow impatient."

"Patience is a virtue, good sir, as I trust you will have cause in your lifetime to learn," said Churur. "But since it draws close to breakfast time, let us indeed be off. Up, beast, *up!*"

After an ear-shattering flap of its leathery wings, the dulcanarg shot skyward like an arrow released from a giant bow. The beast and its two riders were approaching cloud level by the time Hamper caught his breath.

Then he looked down, and his breath left him again.

"This is . . . is heady wine for a formerly ground-bound voyager," he shouted back at Churur.

"Ground-bound?" laughed the dulcanarg-master. "A good choice of words, traveler, for it is precisely bound for the ground that you are at this moment. *Now, beast!*"

When the order Hamper knew was coming finally came, the dulcanarg's movement took him by surprise. It was not the violent movement he'd expected, but merely an easy rolling over into an upside-down flying position. Had not the However's legs been firmly lodged in the stirrup straps, he would have slipped from them and through the reins and at this very moment be helplessly plunging, as Churur had said, groundward. But

now was not the time for such reflection. He was busy freeing the pegleg with its switchblade from his stump.

"Now is the time we part!" he shouted to his rear, and the palm of his left hand thudded into Churur's chest with a mighty push while the switchblade in his right hand severed the reins to his front.

"*Help me, beast!*" Churur wailed, flailing the air with the reins as he grasped, "*I'm fall —*"

But by the time the dulcanarg realized the problem, it was beyond repair.

"*Gleekplort!*" he roared, twisting his head to face Hamper.

"I can't understand a word of what you say, but you can understand me," Hamper said menacingly, holding his blade point under the creature's right eye. "Down there is your ex-master, who at present is good only for food. I suggest we get to him before the vultures do. Then you can breakfast and I, having made my crossing, can be on my way."

The dulcanarg straightened himself and considered his plight. But only for a moment, after which he shot downward. In less time than they'd taken to rise, Hamper felt solid cliff top under his foot. He watched with interest as the dulcanarg was beginning to feed on Churur's mangled body.

"Is breakfast satisfactory?"

Hamper asked quite cordially.

"Dlop," answered the dulcanarg with cheer, just before Hamper plunged the full length of the switchblade into the meaty part of its throat. "Dlop?" said the beast plaintively, and then plopped dead at Hamper's feet.

"It is well said," Hamper said solemnly, "that he who dlops with his mouth full may get something caught in his throat."

Then he began to laugh as he returned the pegleg to its rightful place on his stump. His laughter grew into a full belly-roar.

Then it stopped. He had glanced up and seen three golden dots in the sky, and the smallest was large enough to show a motion of wings.

A protest came to his lips, since he'd done well and truly in heading for Overnon, as the dorpal hawks should know. Or should they?

He groaned as he looked out across the Narrows. The morning sun was in the eastern sky! That meant he was looking south, and that the cliffs across the Narrows were to the south.

Which, of course, meant he was still in Grath and with little time left to leave!

V

The sole member of the Narrows Guild of Shipmakers,

Masters and Moorers expressed surprise.

"Me?" Tachio said. "Me build a ship?"

"And why not?" asked Hamper. "You are the village shipbuilder. Who is to know that you are a shipbuilder if you do not in fact build ships? Now that there is no dulcanarg there is nothing to stop you."

"You are right! I shall build a ship. And you shall be my very first customer, in that you are by occupation a traveler."

"I will be delighted," Hamper said with satisfaction. "When shall we be ready to sail?"

Tachio considered. "Well, I cannot begin the building until after the autumnal equinox, as it is not fitting to shipbuilding prior to that time, according to our customs. Then, of course, there are the ritual cuttings of the wood, after which I shall have to convince the woodcarrier, the carpenter, his assistant, the nail conserver and others that the project is one that merits plying their trades with me rather than independently as heretofore. Then, after the spring equinox observances —"

"But that's almost a year from now!" Hamper wailed. "I have to be in Overnon long before the time you'll get your first tree cut!"

Tachio leaned back in his chair and sighed. "As for your problems, if I were you, I would talk

to the captain of the large sea-ship that just this morning came through the Narrows from the Great Sea. He travels westward along the coast of Groth, he says, mooring at our docks only to engage someone skilled in medicine, to both cure a current difficulty he is experiencing and to journey with him as ship's healer. Mayhap he might be persuaded to take you on as passenger."

"Or as mediciner," Hamper mused.

"But the mediciner you are not," Tachio reminded him. "In any case, even if you were, you'd not get the post. Not if the Lady Gristel wishes it. With her all-powerful stone Scode, she can cure all ills, some of which I understand, very competent mediciners cannot begin to diagnose."

Hamper smiled. "Yet if in fact she be a mediciner, then medicine is her work. Not traveling — which is my occupation. Surely according to your custom, a traveler who medicines along the way is preferable to a mediciner who travels."

Tachio screwed up his face. "While such an interpretation might possibly be gleaned from our customs, it matters little in the current instance, as the Lady Gristel is not of our village but is known widely throughout Grath for her restorative powers. I would not deem it wise to compete

with her powers, if in truth the lady presents herself for the job, which it is said she has done."

"I would deem as you, if in truth her powers be genuine," Hamper agreed. "However, as it is written in the Analogies of Aom, only the fool runs from the tiger he is not certain is there."

"Captain Sabb," said the Lady Gristel, tapping her boot-heel patiently on the rough-hewn deckboards. "You have already engaged me as ship's mediciner. Why do you speak at all with this uncouth tramp?"

Hamper accepted the woman's words with a low bow. Certainly the Lady Gristel was a tigress, maybe, but certainly in addition a woman. Young, lithe, dark of skin and hair, tall and elegantly proportioned — and her sheer linen wrap of green displayed these proportions in detail as well as revealing a bright blue jewel which hung from her neck on a golden chain — she surely would beat the charms of most of Balik's court women with whom Hamper was familiar. And he was familiar with quite a few.

The captain of the vessel seemed taken with these very charms, Hamper also noted, reflecting that this fact would hardly contribute in winning a favorable decision for himself.

"The Lady Gristel speaks

truly," Captain Sabb said. "Her have I already engaged."

"No doubt on the basis of the powers of her stone, I imagine," Hamper said.

The Lady Gristel tightly clasped her right hand to her breasts. The hand was formed into a fist. "How is it you know of the Scodestone?"

"Hamper the Healer — my name and professional title, respectively — knows all, Lady Gristel." He smiled condescendingly. "I do not doubt for a moment that words of my miracles have reached your ears, just as I do not doubt for an additional moment that you would care to admit such hearing to the good captain here."

"I've never heard *any* words concerning this preposterous oaf, good or bad!" snapped Gristel to the captain.

Hamper shrugged and winked at Captain Sabb. "Did I not predict her very words with the utmost in precision? And is it not precision that is called for in matters of medicine?"

"Precision, yes," Gristel said evenly. "But cures also. Already I have cured the good captain of his ailment."

"We shall see the extent of your cure, my lady," Hamper replied.

"Now, good Sabb, just what is it this would-be practitioner of the healing arts would have me believe she's done for you?"

The captain shook his head in wonder at the exchange going on before him. "I had a sneeze," he said simply.

"Hmm," Hamper commented professionally.

"From the Shoals of Baf I had this sneeze, charging upward from the depths of my innermost inwards, and now it is no more."

"Now you sneeze not at all?" Hamper asked.

"It is as you say."

"It is then a powerful power indeed that the stone contains. However, I deem it that such a device would be best placed in the hands of a practitioner of the medical arts who was able to show that he — or she — could best use it. Would you not agree, captain?"

The Lady Gristel snorted. "Agree or no, it matters little to me, and the same can be said as to whatever a make-believe mediciner deems. The fact of the matter is that the stone is mine, to which you may add the additional fact that it is useless in the hand of another."

Hamper smiled. "Make-believe? Would you like to wager on your opinion? With, say the stone as your stake in the outcome?"

The captain shifted his weight from one foot to another. "Enough of this idle talk. The tide is right and we must sail posthaste."

"I, too, am in a hurry, captain," the Lady Gristel said. "But this imposter issues a professional challenge to his betters, and mine is a profession that suffers too much would-be experts. If you can spare a few moments, I would gladly wager as to our relative skills. As he suggests, I will stake the Scodestone, provided he has something as dear to offer."

"He has, dear lady," responded the captain, drawing his dagger and placing its sharp tip on Hamper's breastbone. "He wagers his life."

Hamper ignored the steel. "Truly that is valuable to me, but the stone hardly equals its value. Let me meet her stake with one of the highly potent magical treasures which I tote in my knapsack here. Besides, the stone's value — which I'll admit has been touted in story — has never been proved to my satisfaction."

"But it has to mine," the captain said. "On with your demonstration, else you gulp sea water with pierced lungs."

Hamper shrugged. "Very well. However, since you have my stake in your sword-hand, I insist you hold the Lady Gristel's in your other. You keep the stone in safe-keeping for me."

"For him!" Gristel laughed. "The man has no humility."

"There is a time and place for such luxury," Hamper said pleas-

antly. "Now, then. I shall need no stone or magic other than those of my curing hands. I will, however, in addition require three large buckets full of sea water and three blankets."

Moments later the blue stone was in the captain's fist, and buckets and blankets were placed on the deck before Hamper.

"Be so kind, good captain, as to remove your boots and place each of your feet into one of these buckets — not all three buckets, of, course, just two." Hamper chuckled.

Sabb glared at Hamper and pushed lightly with his weapon. "Is this to be some trick? I warn you, varlet, your life is at stake."

"Knowing full well, would any sane man resort to trickery? Please, sir, be kind enough to remove your blade from its resting place and do as I've asked."

The captain grumbled under his breath, but nonetheless did as Hamper directed, repositioning the dagger afterward. Stepping back from the sharp point, Hamper picked up the three blankets and handed them to three sailors who were watching the above-deck entertainment. "When I tell you, I want you to face your noble captain and flap the blankets vigorously. Do you understand?"

When the three men nodded that they understood, Hamp-

er bent down, picked up the third bucket of sea water and, to the amazement of all on deck, heaved the contents over the entire front of Captain Sabb.

"Now!" Hamper said with emphasis. "Begin the flapping now."

"*This is an outrage!*" screamed Sabb. Reaching forward for Hamper with his steel, he struggled to get closer to his prey, but found the buckets impeded movement of his feet. "I'll kill you for this," he snarled, almost losing his balance. "I'll have you boiled in urbil oil, flayed with chains, keel-hauled thirty times, and fed to the sharks!"

"There are no sharks near these shores," Hamper said calmly.

"Then — I'll find waters where there are s-s-sharks!"

"You're shivering," Hamper observed.

"Of course I'm s-s-shivering! Who wouldn't be — be — *achoo! a-a-a-chooooo!*"

"Beg pardon?" Hamper asked.

"I said *a-achoo!*"

"Which concludes my demonstration. Your men — stop flapping those infernal blankets and help your captain out of the cold water." As they did so, Hamper wrapped one of the blankets around Sabb, who was both furious and shivering uncontrollably.

"You see, of course, sir, that the stone of Scode is next to valueless in the Lady Gristel's hands since

the cures she effects with it are not enduring cures at all — merely temporary relief from minor symptoms. In my hands, however — ”

“*Achoo!*” interrupted the captain.

“Of course. As I say, in my capable hands, cures will be permanent. As I have won the bauble fairly, it is only just that I employ it first upon yourself in our journey west together. Speaking of which, is it not high time for us to be sailing?”

“*Achoo!*”

“Yes sir,” Hamper snapped. Turning to a burly sailor who seemed to be chief mate, he ordered, “Let us be off. Did you not see your captain’s nod of agreement? I myself will now escort him to his quarters, if one of you gentlemen will show me the way.”

Blocking Hamper’s progress, the Lady Gristel reached quickly, but not quickly enough for the captain’s left hand, missing it as it rose to stop an oncoming sneeze.

“This has gone quite far enough! Give me my stone and I shall leave this ship and its entire crew to die from malmedicine. The stone,” she demanded.

“You have lost your stone, my lady,” Hamper said kindly. “But I shall give you the chance to leave the ship in peace. I, being charitable as are all great healers, harbor no resentment.”

“You have — *you* have no resentment?” Gristel flaired. Suddenly her fingernails flashed dangerously close to Hamper’s face. “I’ll take your eyes with me!”

“Restrain her!” Hamper shouted. As the burly mate did so, Hamper shook his head. “See how she attacks your beloved and unwell captain? What should be done with her?”

“Throttle her?” suggested the mate.

“*Throttle her!*” echoed the rest of the crewmen on deck. Evidently, the mate had the respect of the crew, Hamper decided.

“*Achoo!*” cried the captain, miserably.

Hamper nodded. “Yes sir, I quite agree. Well, you men — why stand you here with this woman? You heard Captain Sabb. Off to the brig with her.”

“*Achoo!*”

“Precisely, sir,” said Hamper, once again admiring the hardly-hidden charms of the lady. “I too feel certain that we may find some use for the prisoner.”

As the ship began moving, he was delighted to see the golden specks of the dorsal hawks disappear into the higher sky.

VI

“*Achoo!*” sneezed Sabb, his doubled up form trembling with fever under the heavy

blankets and rugs that held him snug in his bunk. "We've been ad sea two days now," he moaned. "Can't you do nodding for me."

Hamper, relaxing in the plush red leather chair by the side of the bunk, fingered the stone of Scøde thoughtfully. It appeared that the woman Gristel was right after all. The thing didn't work in hands other than hers; at least it didn't in Hamper's. He would have to wrest the secret of its workings from her. But that would have to wait. The However, or Healer, was hungry now.

Rising, he said, "Good Sabb, the cure is already taking effect. Because of the peculiar nature of the disease you've contracted, and due to the length of time you've carried its foulness within you, the only cure for your ailment — known, I might add humbly, only to myself and another highly esteemed mediciner in the north of Freye — is to set up a counter-sneeze to cancel out the first. I've added a bit of fever to hasten the cure, but there is nothing for you to fear. I leave you now to rest, while I go and inspect the state of cleanliness in the cook's galley."

The However was amused to see Grubbus, the ship's portly cook, wielding a heavy meat cleaver to shoo a black underfed cat from a pile of baking dough.

"I trust, Cook Grubbus, that if

you are successful in splitting that bounding animal in twain we shall not find parts of him in the evening soup," Hamper said in greeting.

"Urf," said Cook Grubbus. Not looking up, he unceremoniously passed to Hamper a bowl filled with a porridge-like substance.

"It pleases me," Hamper said amiably, accepting the bowl and a wooden spoon Grubbus extended over the table. "It pleases me that you've become accustomed to the ship healer's afternoon eating customs."

"Nurf," acknowledged the cook who, now giving up all hope of catching the cat, began to sharpen knives on the huge stone grinding wheel on a tripod off one side of the big table. The knives were, of course, those which one could expect to find in a kitchen — long ones, short ones, thin and thick ones — but to the weapon-minded Hamper the variety was fascinating. The thought crossed his mind that one or two of the blades might make welcome additions to his personal arsenal, which consisted currently of the shortknife under his belt and the footblade concealed in his hollow pegleg.

He was crossing around behind the cook and was handling one of the longer knives when a sound to the other side of the table caught his attention."

It caught Grubbus' attention too.

"Wurf!" he snarled at the black cat. But it was too late. The animal already had dipped the front of his face into the bowl of porridge which Hamper had left untasted on the tabletop. "Nurf!" Grubbus threatened, waving a butcher knife in warning.

"That's all right. No harm done," Hamper said in a conciliatory tone, taking advantage of the cook's distracted eyes to conceal three knives in his left sleeve. "No harm done in the least, my good —"

And then Hamper stopped.

His eyes were glued on Grubbus, whose eyes in turn were glued on the cat. The expression on Grubbus' face was one of distinct horror. Hamper warily turned his attention to the cat.

As he did so, the cat screamed. It coughed. It sat down on the tabletop and pawed at its mouth. It coughed again, clawed again, then lay on its back, silent.

Hamper might not have understood, had it not been for Grubbus' reaction. "You tried to poison me?" he said, almost in jest, uncomprehendingly. Why?"

"Urf," Grubbus said, backing away, his lips trembling in fear.

"Why?" Hamper demanded, his right hand slipping under his left sleeve.

"Gurf!" Grubbus cried; grasping the meat cleaver which he'd lain down by the grinding wheel,

he came at Hamper with a mighty lunge.

The lunge ended short of its goal with one of Grubbus' own just-sharpened knives half a foot deep in his chest. He slumped over onto the table as Hamper withdrew a second blade in readiness.

Determining the cook was no longer present in spirit, Hamper pushed the knife back into its place of concealment and began to pace the galley. Why? Grubbus had no reason to kill him. No, somebody must have put him up to it. Somebody who resented the power Hamper had acquired.

Power. The word got Hamper to thinking.

"You do nothing but listen, understand?" Hamper whispered in the blackness.

Molo, the mate, nodded and moved to a place in front of Hamper which the ship's healer had indicated. Hamper smiled a brief smile, assuring himself that if the mate should turn out to be his would-be malefactor, his back would make an easy target.

"Quiet now," Hamper warned on a low tone. Then he called in a louder voice: "Urf!"

The sound was greeted with silence.

"Nurf!" he said still louder.

Again silence. Then, as Hamper was about to call out once more, Gristel answered.

"Grubbus? Is that you, Grubbus?"

"Wurf," Hamper replied.

"Is it done, then? Is the runty pretender dead?"

"Not at all my lady," Hamper replied cheerfully, removing his blade from the proximity of Molo's back. From her cell in the dark dungeon, the Lady Gristel gasped.

"Good mate, the woman's own words convict her," Hamper said in triumph. "She no doubt approached Cook Grubbus when he delivered her meals here. Which is why, in the Balikan navy, prisoners are not fed — a sound practice. But, to the case at hand, what death is normally dealt to such a one who plots against the life of the ship's mediciner?"

Molo pondered. "Gutting. After which the plotter's intestines are equally divided as propitiations to the Eight Winds. But . . ."

"But what? That sounds ideal," Hamper said.

"But that is in the case of a man. This is a woman."

"I am aware of that. However, her venom would match that of any man."

"Which may be true. But one does not flaunt the ideal of the Sea Sagas by slaughtering a woman while on the high waves. It simply is not done. Justice it might be, but the crew would not stand for it. They would mutiny."

"Ha!" laughed Gristel. "I shall live another day to even the score with you."

"Mayhap," considered Hamper. "However, I think you shall have little more to you than another day. Good mate, please to bring the Lady Gristel up to the deck."

Normal work on deck stopped as the crew members sought to satisfy their curiosity about the strange activity surrounding their mate, the mediciner and the prisoner who had been below. There was mumbling among the older sailors who feared the worst, as they saw the girl being placed into a small oarboat and the boat itself being lowered into the sea.

"No doubt," Hamper said in his speech-making voice. "No doubt you are concerned for the safety of our ship as a result of this thing we do now. The ideal of the Sea Sagas is clear in regard to the punishment of crime on the waves. A crime has been committed, the guilty has been found out, and now punishment is meted. Is that not just?"

"Just, yes," responded one old salt. "But this be a woman."

"Indeed it is," Hamper said sternly. "However, let us remember that Ilka-Ina was a woman also. Certainly you all know the history of that witch of the waves, and what the Saga of Borygboun tells us of her fate."

He smiled confidently.

The seamen were silent. No one, however well versed in the sea tales of yore, seemed familiar with the Saga of Borygboun, let alone what it had to say of the wave-witch Ilka-Ina. This did not bother Hamper at all.

"It was a case similar to this, though they say Ilka-Ina was a pretty wench, by far a much greater loss to Trovo than this wretched woman here. But the Saga says without equivocation that, although touched with a bit of sadness, the crew of Borygboun's vessel did their duty and earned eternal favor from the Nine Powers when they set Ilka-Ina adrift in the sea to let the Seven Fates and Eight Winds dictate their pleasure with her. Certain it is that to do the same in the case at hand would be to earn similar favor."

"But I will die if you set me adrift," Gristel wailed. "To do so would not to leave anything to the Fates. I would starve!"

The mate looked troubled. "Her argument argues well, healer."

Hamper nodded. "It does, at that. Which is why we shall give her food to sustain her. See, Lady Gristel, I have brought something with me from the galley. It is a very interesting and filling porridge prepared by our Cook Grubbus before he departed this weary life." Hamper placed the bowl in the bow of the oarboat and cut the central rope holding the boat.

"And now," Hamper announced, "this distasteful business being done, I propose that with due reference to the dictates of good medical therapy the crew take its evening meal early and retire to their own amusements for the night."

"But sir," Molo countered. "It is much too early. We have far to travel yet this night."

"I have discussed it with the captain — before coming up on deck — and he agrees that it would be beneficial for morale."

Besides, thought Hamper to himself, your healer is starved and doesn't dare so much as taste a thing that was prepared in that galley today without someone else tasting it first.

VII

"And why do you choose to disturb your captain?"

Hamper said angrily. He stood blocking the door to the captain's quarters, refusing to allow the mate to pass.

"I seek to disturb no one," Molo replied. "It is just that you are needed below deck, sir. A sickness is among the men — some of them have been complaining now for three days. Ever since that day we sent the woman adrift. In any event, I must have a crew, and I am now operating at third-strength."

"And still the ship sails briskly!

My compliments, good mate. I certainly shall mention your admirable management to our captain — as soon as he awakes from his rest."

"And the men, sir?" Molo said hopefully. You will treat them also?"

Hamper paused. That the crew members were sick he had no doubt. Three days. The day the men feasted in the galley. Perhaps other food had indeed been tampered with. Or perhaps the captain's ailments were contagious. Or perhaps a third factor — for example, the incompetence of Hoddie, the assistant cook who now ran the kitchen — was responsible.

At any rate, only eleven days had passed since the ship had left the coast of Grath. Hamper had no idea where it was in the Little Sea at the present moment, but wherever it was he knew that it was some distance to Overnon. If, as he feared, too many crewmembers expired from whatever ailed them, he would be hard pressed for an explanation — one anyway which would insure his safe conduct to shore. Again, there was also the possibility of contagion. Suppose he himself were to come down with ill health? There was no one and nothing to cure him.

Except the stone of Scode.

He fingered the stone in his trouser pocket.

"Good Molo, certainly I shall see to the men's problems." He

shook his head gravely. "But just between ourselves, I fear the worst. I fear that we are not dealing with any normal kind of illness here, but one which has come upon us through abnormal means."

Molo's eyebrows raised.

"Magic," Hamper said solemnly. "If my suspicion proves correct, a hex or pox of serious proportions was put on this ship and its crew sometime before my arrival aboard."

"Before you came aboard, sir? I thought perhaps that the woman — "

"Certainly not. The woman's power was not real. I demonstrated that quite clearly. No, what we are faced with is something beyond her capability. Tell me — when you were out upon the Great Sea, did you by chance happen to pass through a strange white fog?"

Molo thought. "The Great Sea abounds in patches of fog, but I recall no *strange* bits of it."

"But you did pass through fog?"

"Well, yes, but — "

"I know, the fog exhibited nothing strange," Hamper said professionally. "However, to a trained observer like myself that all the more indicates we are up against a crafty practitioner, one whose skill in sorcery may even — perish the thought — approach the level of my skill in healing. Only an amateur would make the hex-laden fog patch look strange or differ-

ent. Let us ask the Powers for favor, that the skill of my hands, mind and will surpasses that of the fog-tampering wizard. Now I wish to begin seeing the ailing crewmen. Send them to me here one at a time, beginning with those who were nearby when the Lady Gristel effected her so-called cure on Captain Sabb."

"The Lady Gristel, sir? But you said —"

"I know precisely what I said. She could not be the agent responsible for the crew's ailment. However, her practice of false medicine may have compounded the illnesses already in the air."

Of course. He should have thought of it all by himself, rather than needing to be told by Ean, the first crewman to arrive for treatment. "She held the stone up before the captain's face and said something I didn't understand. Then his sneeze was gone."

Magic words!

The difficulty now, of course, was that Hamper didn't know any magic words. However, sailors usually are fellows steeped in such lore . . .

"Ean, no doubt in your travels you have witnessed incantations of various kinds — am I correct?"

"That is true, healer. But my head pains me to such an extent that I wish only to be cured and not engage in conversation."

Hamper smiled. "I know that. However, we mediciners have known of old that talking about some unrelated topic helps ease pain. Also it is an axiom of ancient days that nothing comforts a man more than the sound of his own voice. Be you therefore comforted and tell me — do you happen to recall any of the magic words used in the rites you've witnessed?"

"Well," said Ean, "every sailor who's ever sailed the Little Sea and its inlets and channels knows the words *tiligum fodric rugis*. They are used in —"

"*Tiligum fodric rugis!*" Hamper repeated, dangling the stone of Scode before Ean's nose.

Ean's face froze into terror.

Then he was gone.

What remained was unbelievable.

"No, not unbelievable," Hamper decided aloud, staring at the bald-headed chicken pecking at his peg-leg. It was, after all, the chance Hamper had taken. Not all magic words will suffice in all cases; that certainly was known even among apprentices. But the stone worked with words. He'd at least proved that much.

"Cluck!" said Ean as Hamper tossed the mystified bird into the clothes closet behind the captain's bed. Careful not to disturb the resting Sabb, the However slid the bunk against the closet door. "Sleep

on, good captain. By the time you awake, I may have found the precious formula I seek."

"*Tisiphone Oss*," said Ust, a masthand, next to be admitted.

"*Tisiphone oss*," repeated Hamper who then quickly flipped out his pegleg-blade, just in time to skewer the hand-sized but deadly bleb-snake that poised fang-forward at the However's booted foot.

Amble, the second mate, nodded. "Every sailor of the Little Sea and its inlets and channels knows the words *tiligum fodric rugis* — but excuse me, sire. Isn't that a chicken I hear?"

"Chicken?" Hamper asked. "It appears your ailment has reached an advanced stage. However, do you happen to recall the situation in which the words were used? In what kind of rite?"

Hamper drummed his fingers on his pegleg.

" — or knows they're used in — but that's an unusual thing."

"What is?"

"The chicken," Amble said, "You know, the chicken I heard. I still hear it, as a matter of fact."

"There is no chicken here, I assure you."

Amble nodded. "I know, but it's unusal. That I should hear a chicken at the very time you should ask me the use of the words *tiligum fodric rugis*, which every sailor or who's —"

"My good Amble," Hamper said levelly. It is quite conceivable that we shall all be dead as doormats by the time I elicit this information from you. If you please."

"It's for chickens, it is," Amble said.

"*Chickens*?"

"Chickens. The words, the incantation. On the Isle of Budral-ko Yu the words are used in a rite to insure the chicken farmers of a good brood."

Hamper screwed up his face in thought. "Ah. But do you know any more magic words — for instance, the words *tisiphone oss*? Do they mean anything to you?"

Amble considered, "Part of a rite of thanks or propitiation or something. The magi-bobos of Desia offer it six times a year to —"

"Let me tell you," Hamper broke in. "They offer it to bleb-snakes."

"You've been to Desia, I take it," Amble said approvingly. "The women of Desia, now there is a choice bunch of —"

"Amble — listen carefully now. In all your travels have you ever witnessed any rites connected with insuring the health of man?"

The silence that followed would have been deafening to Hamper, had it not been for the clucking of an imaginary chicken in the clothes closet.

"Well, yes, sort of," Amble said finally.

"Go on, man — tell me the words!" Hamper urged.

"Tuggus taggus togg," Amble said. "In the peninsular village of Tintim that was the — "

" — incantion for the mating of — "

Amble stopped and looked at Hamper. He didn't remember the first part of his sentence, but the However finished it for him.

"For the mating of youth," he said tonelessly.

"Sir?" asked the fourteen year old boy before him. "Sir — where am I and who are you and . . . who am I?"

Hamper shook his head. "You are a stowaway, my boy. I'm the ship's healer. Your memory's gone, I'm afraid. Now I must report you to the mate, whom I must see anyway. No doubt he'll find suitable employment for you in the galley."

Molo didn't understand. "But the men you've treated, sir? Where are they?" He asked the question upon Hamper's directing him to send up the eleventh seaman.

"I've confined them temporarily," Hamper replied.

It was true in a way — at least for six of the ten. The chicken, turtle and mog-lizard were confined in closet, trunk and Sabb's left boot, respectively. Amble was confined in the galley, and the seaman who turned into about six

ounces of water was resting now in a sponge, comfortably, Hamper hoped. The others were perhaps confined in a more permanent way. There was the flatfish who died thrashing his tail on the cabin floor. There was the fire Hamper had to extinguish. There was the gust of East Wind that he'd let escape through a convenient port-hole. And finally there was the unfortunate fellow who simply disappeared to nothingness.

Standing in the doorway to the captain's cabin, Molo scratched his nose. Hamper recognized in the mate's face the beginning of doubt. And then the expression changed to one of wonder.

The cause of the change was a crashing sound from above deck. When the sound was repeated, Molo's face grew stern. "I hope I am wrong," he told Hamper. "But the men have been overworked, underfed and worried about their fates. They are ripe for a mutiny, by my judgment."

"Mutiny? Preposterous!" Hamper sneered, knowing full well what such a turn in events might mean to his own safety. "No one would dare. But if they did, surely you would put an immediate halt to such an attempt."

"Surely," the mate said, not so surely.

"Surely. For, as the oft-quoted Saga of Borygoun has it, mutiny stops where the mate begins."

Shouts now came from above as Molo turned to the steps leading to the deck. "Courage, good healer. If ill befalls us, may we meet in the Mariner Mountains which all sailors killed at sea inhabit."

"Courage," returned Hamper, saluting the mate with a kitchen knife he'd drawn from under his jacket. "I am proud that you among seamen would accept me as a brother of the waves."

As Molo stalked off with determination, Hamper quickly stepped inside the captain's cabin and jammed the bolt home. It wouldn't hold for long, he reflected, but it might hold long enough for Hamper to talk to the men when they came. And while there was time for talking, there was always a chance.

If he could get the captain up on deck, if only for a moment. If he could convince the men that the captain had been cured. A few words from Sabb might be inspiring. He was, after all, a leader of men. He was their capt —

He had been watching Sabb. Now he looked more closely. Hamper shuddered. There would be no inspiring words from Captain Sabb, who indeed was at peace with the world.

He shrugged and turned away from the corpse. Discard one plan, he thought. Plan two had been formed. It might not be feasible,

either, but as one panfish said to another in the children's moral story, frying comes from lack of trying. At worst his fate would be no worse than what he'd get remaining here.

VIII

"Oho!" cried Hamper, boldly ascending the steps, the captain's sword protecting his belly. "Oho, men! The ship is ours. I, your beloved healer, have just now dispatched the despicable Sabb!"

"Oho!" came an answering shout, and a meaty hand was thrust down to assist Hamper to the deck.

The hand, Hamper saw, was attached to a man of great bulk dressed in shiny orange garb. Under a wide-brimmed hat, matching in color, orange eyes sighted along a blood-dripping cutlass aimed precisely toward the middle of the However's spleen.

Hamper let the captain's sword clang to the deck as an expression of friendliness.

"You, I take it, are the ship's mediciner?" the man in orange questioned.

Noting the hewn and hacked bodies strewn over the deck, Molo's mangled form among them, and noting also the fast-sailed ship alongside his own, it was a weak smile that Hamper mustered up. Molo had been wrong.

"I am ship's healer, yes. I, however, am at a disadvantage, not knowing to whom I have the pleasure of speaking."

"Easily rectified, prisoner," the man in orange said with a bow. "I am Poncil, brother-in-law to Cott Landric, chieftain of the Thaas pirate domain of Fyg."

My regards to your noble and renowned brother-in-law," Hamper said, returning the bow.

The response was one evidently not expected by Poncil. "You — you know Cott Landric?"

Hamper spread his hands expansively. "Who does not know of the kindness, the generosity and justice of the chieftain of the Thaas pirate domain of Fyg? But why, pray, does Cott Landric's brother-in-law attack this so unworthy a prize? There are no treasures aboard, I can assure you."

Poncil's face cheered. "I am satisfied that you are not acquainted with our chieftain. As to treasure, I am sent by Cott Landric to remove from this ship the magic stone of Scode which he has been told is carried by the vessel's healer."

"The stone of Scode?" Hamper repeated, his tone puzzled.

"The stone or your gizzard on my blade," Poncil said icily. "The remainder of your crew shall be eaten for our evening banquet. You may spare your life by producing the stone immediately."

Hamper again managed a weak smile. "It is said among the Mandars of Sule that when the path comes to a dead-end, it is expeditious to turn around. Naturally, I'll be more than pleased to produce the stone."

"The stone," said Hamper. "Though I fear it is a bit heavy."

"*That is the stone?*" Poncil asked. "It looks rather much like a grinding wheel to me."

Hamper surveyed the wheel proudly. "Which is one reason why it is here in the galley. No one, I submit, would suspect a lowly grinding wheel of being the miraculous stone it is."

"True, mediciner. No one would."

"The shape is a fitting one, however," Hamper added. "For the stone's main function is grinding away disease, is it not?"

"Enough chatter!" Poncil snapped. "My chief, Cott Landric, will recognize the true stone."

"Excellent," Hamper said. "There is however, one small problem — by which I mean the difficulty of making the stone work. You see, you cannot control the stone until you wrest its power away from its current owner."

"Easily done, mediciner," Poncil said. Again his sword-point drew closer to Hamper's tender areas.

"Not so easily," Hamper said

quickly. "The stone and its power are passed from hand to hand only through the Ordeal of Bondage between the current owner and the challenger."

"What is the nature of this Ordeal? Surely I shall best you in any contest."

"Your confidence is well-placed in your physical prowess," Hamper said dutifully. "However, the stone is a hard taskmistress and chooses her masters strangely. But in that you present yourself as challenger, I shall submit to the Ordeal, although with hesitation. There now, I have loosened the stone from its bearings. As challenger it falls to you to carry the stone to the deck."

Moments later, all was ready.

At the edge of the captured vessel's deck, facing the pirate ship, stood Hamper and Poncil. Through the center hole of the grinding wheel, a rope as thick as a strong man's forearm had been passed several times, wound around and around the wheel like radii and knotted at the wheel-top. The two ends of the rope were knotted also, one around the left leg of the pirate Poncil and the other around Hamper's left leg, his peg-leg.

"Knot it tightly, lads," Poncil directed. "Make sure he's not able to slip the end of his peg-leg through the loop."

"Noting that indeed the knots

were such that he would have no chance of doing so," Hamper chortled. "Slip through? If I did that, I'd hazard losing the stone, and I sincerely do not wish to do that. It's he who brings the stone up from the water who's victor of the Ordeal."

"Naturally, that will be me," Poncil retorted.

The pirates on deck cheered.

"Perhaps," said Hamper. "But if not, I'd like your assurance on a matter that has been bothering me somewhat."

"Which is?" Poncil said impatiently.

"Simply a swearance of fealty on the part of your men — should I be the one to bring up the stone."

Poncil grinned. "Fealty? Why not? Men, I want you all to swear on your honor as noble brigands of the high seas that, in the unlikely event that this less-than-man is victorious, you will obey him as you would me. Do you so solemnly swear?"

The pirates again cheered.

Poncil sneered and threw the wheel overboard.

It splashed into the sea.

Poncil splashed after it.

Hamper splashed next, holding his breath and reaching down with his left hand to his pegleg. A heartbeat later he was swimming upward to the surface, the rope which had been binding him to the stone neatly sliced by the pegleg

sword. Hamper returned the blade to its place of concealment when his head broke the water.

“I, Hamper the Healer, am victorious!” he shouted, noting that his appearance and announcement were greeted without cheers. Without due recognition even, he further noted as he climbed the rope ladder of Sabb’s ship.

One of the pirates advanced, sword in hand. “Poncil — where be Poncil?”

“At the bottom of the sea, I rather suppose,” answered Hamper.

“With the stone,” responded the pirate, his eyes on the However’s pegleg.

“Not so. I won the Ordeal by changing the stone into a smaller shape — and magically weighting Poncil’s body.” He produced the blue stone from within his jacket.

“You don’t believe me?” Hamper said, beginning to worry.

The pirate with drawn blade controlled his merriment. “It is not that, good sir. What you hold before us may be, as you say, this stone or wheel or whatever. It’s what you said about us that is funny.”

“I said about you? Nothing — except that you are good loyal seamen.”

“And so we are — to Cott Landric, our chief. But not to anyone such as Poncil, a brother-

in-law, much less Hamper, a healer.”

“I see,” Hamper said quietly.

“In that case,” said Hamper, “*tiligum fordic rugis!*”

“Cluck!” said the pirate, who dropped his sword and began searching the deck for pecking material.

No one laughed.

“Now do I have your fealty?” Hamper demanded.

“Yea, healer,” answered one. “You have it — for the moment.”

Hamper held the stone high. The men before him, brutes and cut-throats all, cowered and shrank back. “That is as long as I shall require your loyalty,” he said firmly. “And now we shall cross over to your ship, a vessel swifter than this we now occupy. We have sailing to do.”

“Yes sir!” snapped the brigand nearest Hamper. “Our destination, sir?”

Hamper sighed with relief. “Point the bow to the southeast. We sail for Overnon.”

He could get along with these pirates, he felt. And that would mean all was smooth sailing ahead, to coin a phrase. It was only proper, of course. Virtue and integrity deserved a reward.

However —

He glanced up into the sky, and his face relaxed. There wasn’t the tiniest trace of a golden dorpall hawk to be seen. —END

it is displaced into modern anachronistic times or until its character is displaced by the introduction of some purely human attitudes. A troll hiding in a bridge in a medieval village is purely ugly, but he becomes funny when Charles Addams puts him in the middle of Lincoln Tunnel.

Our current fads in entertainment fantasy have leaned more heavily on displacement than at any time I can remember. Certainly Conan is a displacement in time — a displacement to a time that could never have existed, but which we make real.

The most successful of all recent fantasy is that by Professor Tolkien, and here the displacement is almost complete. We are in another time — a time before man could take over the full responsibility of earth, and before our technical age could dawn. We are displaced in space — in fact, we are displaced out of space and our universe to another one, with its own laws and its own order of nature. The history of the world we move to is complete and rich, stretching for millenia — but it is not our history. And above all, our attitudes must be displaced to move about there in comfort. We must learn to accept good and evil as real and true, and we must relate directly to beauty and ugliness as things having true influence.

Yet the displacement can never be total, for that way lies either madness or scholarship — a divorce from the reality or a genuine knowledge of such things as Greek reality in the Classic Age. The joy comes

from the butting together of the displaced against that which remains firmly anchored to our own reality. And it is here that the Tolkien books may show the greatest genius, since they anchor us with almost familiar Shire folk and with vast amounts of the folklore most of us don't realize we are steeped in — such as our legend of Avalon, displaced to the home of the elves in Middle Earth.

I think the progress in displacement in our literature is an evolution that we can cheer in every way. It takes a fairly flexible mind to accept displacement of any kind, and it's a lovely thing to know that so many of our younger people have that flexibility. And the use of such displacement cannot help but increase the flexibility that seems to me the most desirable of mental attributes.

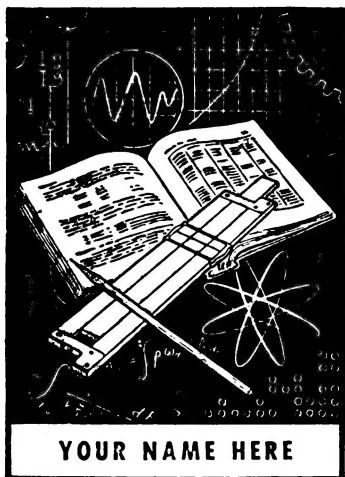
There are a great many people of serious literary reputation who might disagree with me, of course. To them the admission of displacement as a major element in fantasy would prove that it is simply an escape literature.

It doesn't necessarily follow. True, we're "escaping" into another reality; but we're mostly not escaping *from* any reality. Instead, fantasy seems to yield most enjoyment when the mind can learn to accept a new reality without losing any contact with the old.

But all such serious discussion doesn't matter. Fantasy wasn't meant to be taken seriously, fortunately. It should be fun — which is what all literature was meant to be, anyhow.

LESTER DEL REY

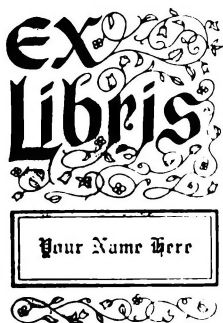
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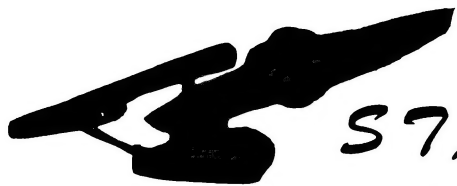
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